Draco Malfoy and the Wheel of Hecate

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Draco Malfoy and the Wheel of Hecate

by starbrigid

Summary

Whatever Draco does in the past, it seems he is unable to change much for the better. But he hasn't given up trying, and in the year where Voldemort rises again, he will stop at nothing to ensure he prevents it, leading him down a dangerous path. Standing in his way is not only the force of evil and the force of destiny, but the force of his own indecision, as he finds he can no longer share his secrets with his godfather, nor can he protect his beloved cousin Luna- and nor can he keep his feelings for Harry a secret any longer either. For better or for worse, the reckoning has come.

Notes

Hi everyone! Thanks so much for everyone's thoughts and comments last time, I really appreciate them! It's the fourth book... the big one! O_O Standard warning for this fic that it will include violence, prejudice, reference to abuse and sex acts, poor self-esteem, unreliable/deficient narration, and at times major moral ambiguity. Disclaimer that I love all the characters and no character-bashing is meant, save from Draco's limited perspective.

There is a playlist for this fic with a song for each chapter that updates here.

The plan is to update the fic every other day.

The fanart embedded in this chapter is by Lulithesmithfan! Here is the post on Lulithesmithfan's tumblr: Draco and Luna.

Please enjoy!

- Translation into 中文-普通话 國語 available: 德拉科马尔福与赫卡忒之轮 by Asuka041942

Maledictum

It had taken more than three years since Draco awoke from a nightmare of a mirror he could not break, but finally, Lucius Malfoy had seemed to come to the realization his son might be powerful. Or at least that there was something unspeakably wrong with him.

Maybe it was Draco's suspiciously quiet behavior over the summer, save for his insistence on attending the Muggle World Cup final with the Grangers, to the point of threatening bodily harm to himself as well as others if he was not allowed. Maybe it was the handful of visits that Theo paid to Malfoy Manor that summer to play Quidditch together, which Father had put a stop to once Mother overheard the two boys earnestly discussing whether it would be possible to bring the Basilisk in the Chamber of Secrets back to life as a reanimated corpse.

Maybe it was the *means* with which Draco and the Grangers traveled to Pasadena, by a Portkey Draco told his father he had bought for them by perfectly above-board means. Father seemed to know Draco had illegally made it himself, with no way to prove it.

Maybe it was the safe return of their party to the Grangers' for his following stay in Hampstead, showing the Portkey had worked, which it damn well should have, given the amount of that summer Draco had incidentally spent devoted to research of the objects.

Maybe it was how on the day of Draco's return, Mother caught him sitting on the ground under the portrait of Grandfather Abraxas discussing young Voldemort, though in Draco's defense, that was just to ask some questions from Luna about him.

Or maybe it was that on the night of the third of August, 1994, Father caught his son performing Unforgivables on a frozen lot of two dozen of the Manor's finest cave spiders, all waiting in a line for their turn to be tormented. To Father's bewildered bellowing, Draco had whined whether Father would have preferred if he had been practicing on the elves, upon which he had actually rather gotten the impression of an affirmative.

But it disturbed Father more than Draco would have anticipated, enough to prompt one of their grand doomed attempts to replace Draco's wand which never bore fruit. He didn't get within a block of Ollivander's this time either, and all three Malfoys had the feel as they went that it was more of a ceremonial occasion than a practical one.

At dinner that night, neither of his parents resisted Draco's attempts to turn the conversation to a more interesting subject, namely the string of victims coming forward in the papers after having their memories restored, with tales of being Obliviated by Gilderoy Lockhart. Father pronounced himself unsurprised to hear the ex-Defense professor's supposed heroic deeds had not been his own.

"Style over substance can be excusable in a man," Father said, lip curling, "But only if it is in *good* style."

Draco could only think Severus would concur, and missed him all the more.

So the wand issue was ostensibly dropped. But Father continued his threats to leave Draco home from the Quidditch World Cup if he was so fond of the Muggle one, and upped the ante by threatening to keep Draco from visiting his Gryffindor friends there. Unlike the first, which Father would never do when they'd been invited to the Minister's box, the second was an absolutely practicable threat, for Father to do everything in his power to keep Draco away from Weasleys.

Draco submitted to the magical inspection Father ordained, and came obediently to the cellars the next afternoon, for an appointment with the man Father only referred to as *The Assessor.*

The Assessor turned out to be a somewhat eccentric-looking wizard, perhaps in his mid-thirties or forties, with the look of a Slytherin about him from a block away: vampirically pale skin, waist-length black hair going charcoal gray that gave his whole frame the look of an old rotting garden statue, and eyes half the size of his head, of a distinct chemical-looking violet. He was not quite as tall as Draco, or he would not have been, had he not been wearing red dragonhide boots so high that he loomed over Father as well. He introduced himself as Pammaque Periander, claimed to actually be a Ravenclaw, and wore robes of dark burgundy mottled over by feathers from the silver bird called Maledictum he kept on his hunching shoulder.

Maledictum was very large and a very striking mintish silver-green. Her mournful ice gray eyes- Periander said she was a *her*- trained exclusively on Draco from the moment he entered with his master, to the point that as strange as his master seemed, Draco had difficulty paying attention to anything but the bird.

Periander seemed used to this, and complimented Draco on his eye for magical creatures when Draco correctly identified her as an Augurey, a bird that could detect rain and repel ink with her feathers. He was more impressed when Draco said he wasn't taking Care of Magical Creatures at Hogwarts. Draco had taken it in the blue line and learned of Augureys there, but even if he'd wanted to tell the stranger that, his tongue would have locked itself up against the roof of his mouth.

"I know people used to think these birds could predict death," Draco said, "And that was disproven, but of this bird, from the way she's looking at me, I'd believe it."

"The bird, young gentleman," Periander said, with a cringing sort of laugh, "Is blind."

"Her name, though," Draco mused, "Is it just Maledictum, after the Latin for curse, or could this creature be a *Maledictus*? I hadn't thought Augureys ever-"

"Draco," Father said through gritted teeth, "Mr. Periander is not here to assess your *magical creature knowledge.* He is here to test the nature, strength, and potential of your magic. I suggest you give him the chance to request some of you, and stop wasting all of our time."

Father seemed anxious enough, and Periander seemed eccentric but competent enough, that this almost seemed a genuine attempt by Father to *help* Draco. Nothing could be more foreboding.

"Fine, fine," Draco sighed, though he'd been hoping that hobnobbing with the man would tend him towards a more charitable assessment. And this bird would prove an interesting anecdote for Hagrid, not that Father would listen to that consideration of Draco's with anything but a certain suppressed willingness to practice some Unforgivables himself. "Very well, Mr. Periander. *Assess* me."

"Of course, young gentleman," said Periander, with a half-grimacing flash of the unnaturally whitest teeth that Draco had ever seen, and pulled out his wand, gesturing for Draco to do the same. "No need to be nervous. The procedure is simple, and will take less than half an hour. Mr. Malfoy, these cellars are secure and reinforced?" Father nodded tightly, seeming disinclined to spend any more time than necessary with this odd assessor, which he was suffering through for Draco's sake. "We will begin with a test of your raw magical power. Mr. Malfoy, you may wish to stand back."

Father's lip curled, and he did not move a muscle, but Periander did not enforce it. He merely murmured into the ear of Maledictum, who flapped her great iridescent wings and left him, to fly to the furthest ceiling of the cellar from them, perching on the old rusted manacles that hung there. With a pecking of her beak, the rust came off the manacles in a slow shower of ruddy dust, and the chain unfastened and grew link by link until it reached the floor. When Maledictum made a final flight around the chain, its links went from dark iron to as silver as the bird. "Not a convenient test for werewolves," Draco said drolly, and Periander had the grace to make that grimacing smile.

"Indeed, young gentleman. We begin with the elements."

Draco hesitated before casting. "Mr. Periander... should I hold back?"

Periander eyed him cannily, while Draco wished Father was not nearby listening so closely. "Are you in the habit of holding back when you cast, young gentleman? Your father has told me all there is to know about your wand. Have you found it difficult to control your magical power?"

Draco nodded, finding himself more nervous than he had ever planned to be, at this exam his old self in the blue loop would never have been given. Relatively average, the first Draco Malfoy. "Yes, sir." It came out unwittingly, though he was no longer in the habit of ever calling his own father sir. Something about this man or his bird unnerved him already, or perhaps it was some slight physical resemblance he bore to Severus. "But when I let loose its full power, it's often exhausting..."

"Exhaust yourself, young gentleman," Periander said with a flicker of his icy eyes. "We begin with the elements. Enchantment of the earth..." He tossed a golden set of seeds at the foot of the silver chain. "Grow the rose with the Herbivicus charm. You are familiar? Good. Pour your magical energy into the plant, and once it is grown, ensnare the chain with it, and attempt to wrest the chain from the ground with its vines."

"Yes, sir," Draco said, and closed his eyes before casting, "Herbivicus." Without a conscious dam on his magic, the charm worked faster than he expected. Or perhaps it was something in those golden seeds, which turned quickly to a string of golden roses, curling around the chain in the entwining motions Draco made with his wand. He sent one stem up through the right

side of each link, another through each left, and a third to entwine all around the base of each chain and pull.

The roses quickly began to lose their golden petals, once Draco cast Herbivicus again and the flowers began to try to grow their mutated way outward, rapidly looping weight pulling on the chain. Draco could feel Father's gaze burning a hole in his wand. It made him push defiantly into the spell, where he knew he perhaps should have held something back. But he didn't, and it didn't matter. The chain never seemed to budge an inch.

"Very well. Enough. Feel free to use any other earth magic you know." Periander had seemed to expect more, from what he had been told. Draco just stood there, unwilling to admit he wasn't exactly Neville Longbottom when it came to plants, and finally Periander seemed mercifully to get the hint. "From earth to water. Cast the following: Aqua eructo."

Draco did, and a blast of water sprayed out from his wand over the silver chain, which swayed and trembled from the impact but did not budge from its place in the stone.

"Good," said Periander, and the three watched as the water dripped down into the well below the manacles, where once blood from prisoners had surely flown. He cast Glacius wordlessly, preventing any excess water from reaching them, and then Evanesco to make it disappear. "Your goal, young gentleman, is to make the chain come out of the stone. Use any other water spells you know to attempt this feat."

"Aguamenti!" Draco yelled, and stressed into the spell, but found its pretty, clear stream barely strong enough to reach the chain. "Aqua eructo duo! Aqua eructo duo!" Draco tried, and the chain swayed harder, water dripping down its glimmering links, but showed no sign of budging. Father had stepped up on the threshold of the door to the cellar room, to keep his shoes from getting wet or his person from behind hit by the spray, before casting a shield charm on himself with a wrinkled nose. "Aqua eructo duo!" Draco cast a last time, and the blast rebounded so hard off the cellar walls that it soaked both Draco and Periander to the bone.

Periander just smiled and cast a Hot-Air charm on himself and the shivering Draco. Without needing to be bid, Maledictum flew forward and flapped her wings until the water almost seemed to dry beneath their accumulating heat. So far, Father ought to be less impressed by his son than the bird. Unfortunately, Draco suspected the creature wasn't for sale.

"From water to air. Cast the Ventus jinx and attempt to blow the chain from its place."

This charm was more of a mainstay of Draco's, and he knew the feeling of pouring power into expelling it. He remembered his attempts to destroy the Mirror of Erised in first year, and called out "Ventus!" with confidence, expecting to blow the chain from the floor, and possibly off its hinges at the top, right away. But the chain merely rattled. Draco closed his eyes, imagining the murky inky blackness that came out of his wand or spells sometimes when he was less restrained, the shadow that had greeted his claiming of the talon wand. The wind that blew out was blacker then, but did not budge the chain, though Draco felt it whip his hair back over his cheeks, only the rose clasp keeping it pulled back.

"Whatever spells you wish," Periander said again.

"Ventus duo!" Draco tried, but was frustrated so quickly by the lack of desired impact that he went quickly to "Ventus tria!" He closed his eyes and concentrated, pushing his wand forward and envisioning a dark wind tearing the silver chain into individual links. His eyes opened when the wind blew his clasp from his hair, despite the expensive protective enchantments on the small bauble Potter had gotten him. The chin-length blond strands began to whip around his face, catching over his parted lips, teeth gritted hard in concentration.

He bit his lower lip, staring into the darkening spiral of wind that was fast becoming a tornado, and heard several snapping and cracking sounds he almost thought had to be the chain giving way. But when Periander told him to stop, the tornado cleared to reveal the chain intact. Even if some of the silver on it had rusted away. Periander had to send his bird over to restore it with some elegant swoops around, her wings giving off a scent somewhere between anise and rotting flesh.

Potter, Draco thought with self-loathing. *Potter would have already obliterated the chain.*

"At last, from air to fire," Periander said, and turned to Father. "Your son has been stronger in each element in turn, but strongest by far so far in air. Perhaps with a name like Draco, fire will be stronger yet." And didn't *that* give Draco a lot to live up to.

"I take it," Draco quipped, "When you say I can use whatever spells I want after the start, those don't include Fiendfyre?" That startled a laugh from Father for once, while Periander seemed to take him seriously, and gravely shook his head, stroking his bird protectively on his shoulder.

"Cast the Incendio charm," Periander instructed. "And yes, when you have finished your efforts with that, you may try any other fire spells you wish. Although indeed, *not* Fiendfyre."

Draco grinned at the strange man's shudder. "Incendio!" He doubted it would have much effect, and it didn't. He smirked to himself before getting on to what he really wanted to do. Ever since his cousin Nymphadora had cast this at him during their duel at Grimmauld Place, he'd wanted to try it. He'd found the spell soon after his birthday, and had no small amount of fun practicing it throughout these cellars.

"Lacarnum inflamari!" He didn't hit the chain directly the first time, but the very blast of it passing still rattled the chain more than anything had thus far. "Lacarnum inflamari!" Draco cast and hit directly this time, and the chain shrieked like a living thing. Draco grinned, opening his mouth wide and imagining the flames expelling not from the talon wand but his throat, like a real dragon. He called it out again and again.

"Lacarnum inflamari! Lacarnum inflamari! Lacarnum inflamari!" Each time, the ball of fire it produced was bigger. Draco began to laugh as the lengths of chain lost their silver and went rusted and dark, and then blackened like wood left in a fireplace too long. "Lacarnum inflamari! Lacarnum inflamari!" The air was filling with smoke, Draco's hair and robes whipping around him with eyes hurting from the brightness of the fire, but Draco was having too much fun to stop.

"LACARNUM INFLAMARI!" A fireball larger than Draco flew out of his wand and crashed into the chain, ripping it from the floor and off its hinges from above, the chain and the

manacles crashing to the ash-covered blackened ground where they began to crumble. Draco raised his wand again, only for a distant voice to call, "Enough! Young gentleman, enough! Incendium glacius! Incendium glacius!" Periander had to cast the flame-freezing charm time after time, to very little effect on the gathered fire before them, taking up more than half the room now. Draco himself had little more success, until finally Maledictum had flown forward and beaten her wings over it. Where their beating had seemed to produce heat before, to dry the water, now it was merely air that beat out the flames.

"Father!" Draco called excitedly. "Father, I did it! I broke the chain! Father!" When there was no answer, Draco frowned and looked around. "Father?" He could see his father nowhere in sight.

Periander cleared his throat in audible embarrassment. "Your father had his shield charm broken by the blasts. He has retreated, I believe, most prudently so, to a safe distance."

He looked genuinely alarmed when that made Draco laugh. "Careful," he said in a softer voice. "Careful, young gentleman. Such power can be experienced as most intoxicating. But there is a price to its intoxication *past* exhaustion. That price is one that Maledictum knows well."

Father returned, having found the coast was clear, before Periander could explain his cryptic bird-related remarks, and that led into the final part of the assessment. "Can you conjure an animal?" Periander asked Draco, and Draco nodded.

"Serpensortia," Draco cast. When he looked back at Father, he found his father looking windswept and shaken, not so much by the spell itself or even the size of the glimmering green snake, but rather by the careless ease with which Draco cast it. "What should I do with it?"

"We have tested the elemental nature of your magic, strongest in wind and most of all fire, and the strength of each element. I will speak to your father later of the meaning of all this. We must first, though, end by testing the *darkness* of that magic, young gentleman. Have you ever performed the Unforgivable curses?" Draco looked back at Father, who gave an impatient nod, as if to say, *He won't report you, get on with it, my hair needs serious fixing right now.* Draco nodded.

"We will begin with the Imperius curse."

"Imperio," Draco cast, and he might as well have been a Parselmouth for how eagerly the snake coiled up in front of him, ready to obey. "What do you want me to make it do?" Draco smirked down at it. "Hiss at my father," he called, and when it let out that requested hiss, he could hear Father jump back, and had to stifle a laugh.

Periander sounded strained. "You have successfully demonstrated your command of Imperius, I would say. Let it go. Now try the Cruciatus curse. This curse may be more difficult, as you need to truly mean it to-"

"Crucio," Draco said, and had the snake writhing in pain before Periander could finish his sentence. Practice had made it much easier to draw in the concentration he needed. Besides,

with his father in the room, it was never difficult to summon up negative energy. "Enough?"

"Enough," said Periander. "Now finish it off."

"Sectumsempra!" Draco cast. Though his magic was beginning to feel thin, the slashes appeared in the snake just as envisioned.

"Draco," Father said with a knife edge in his voice, "That was not the Killing curse."

"It's gonna be dead soon, isn't it?"

"Young gentleman," Periander asked, "I must ask you to perform the Killing curse. Only for the purposes of assessment." Maledictum made a shrill call.

"I haven't ever done that," Draco said, shivering as he stared into the faces of the men willing him to kill, while the snake bled to death beneath them. "I don't ever want to-"

"Draco, if you do not, the assessment will be incomplete," Father sighed, and Periander said,

"The beast is dying already. You will be putting it out of its misery. Kinder this way."

Draco closed his eyes, took a deep, shuddering breath, and called out Avada Kedavra for the first time in his life. He had to call it out again, before the unmistakable shade of electric green light that only appeared only in his worst and best dreams exploded from the talon wand, and sent the snake's spasming foaming head abruptly still.

"Come, Mr. Malfoy," Periander said, and led Father up the stairs, perhaps to deliver the results of the assessment without Draco. He probably wasn't invited, but his legs wouldn't make the effort to follow them anyway. The intoxication was gone. He was left alone, staring down at the results of his work.

Except not alone, because Maledictum had beat her great silver wings and descended to feast on the remains of the Slytherin-green snake.

It took two weeks for the full results of Draco's magical assessment to come, a delay apparently resulting from some complicated process surrounding Maledictum. Draco wondered if the bird had to wait to fully digest the innards of the murdered animal before working on it.

Nor did Father give Draco any hint as to what they said. All Draco got was a dark look before he crumpled it up in his palm. When Draco raised his wand to summon it to him, Father waved a hand to wandlessly burn it to embers.

Mother wrinkled her nose as the cinders drifted towards her soup. "Not at the table, dear."

Those results, Draco had been eager to know, but the result of Ireland-Bulgaria he already knew. He had to go to the Quidditch World Cup and pretend not to know it all the same. Still, he had new experiences to look forward to in visiting his friends in the tent city, whereas his

father had only taken him by Side-Along Apparition to the forest point soon before the match began in the blue loop. He'd learned a trick of getting the results he wanted from bargaining with Father: ask for something he wanted to give you even less than what you actually wanted. Then it was easy to get him to back down to what you were really after, to avoid the seemingly greater evil.

So it was that Draco secured the lesser evil of visiting with his friends before the match, instead of his first false request of visiting after. Father was naturally dismayed at the idea of Draco spending time with Muggleborns following Ireland's victory, but Draco could play wide-eyed and innocent, and Father agreed to arrange for Draco to spend all day at the match site beforehand, if he consented to leave right after with Mother. Innocence was particularly easy to feign, given that unlike in the blue loop, Father did not give any warning of events that were to ensue of a less festive complexion than Quidditch. Draco thought it displayed a singular lack of disregard for his son's welfare, but he wasn't complaining, if it got him the chance to see the Lovegoods' tent.

When Mother Apparated in with him and then away by herself on the morning of the final, his first goal was to locate his cousin. Luna had been there a week already with her father, helping him put out human interest stories surrounding the cup. He'd been able to recognize her touch in some of the reports, with or without her name on the byline. With a subscription to the Quibbler as her birthday gift to him this year, he'd been able to jealously follow along by the paper, as well as by her bright, incoherent letters. He remembered the moors from the blue loop, but only knew the city of tents from a distance. For a moment, the image his eyes gave him of the sunrise over them was blotted out and replaced by a green skull and snake, flashing back and forth at its first sight.

He stroked his wand in his pocket and reactivated his tracking charm on Luna's necklace. "Avenseguim," he whispered, and felt the tug towards that ramshackle shanty town of flaps in every color under the sky, beckoning already with some illusive feel of the calm and acceptance his cousin's presence tended to bring in him. He did not have to follow the tug far before he caught that bright flash of white-blond hair, spilling down a small shamrock-covered back, and called out, "Luna! How's my favorite cousin?"

It would have made his old self shudder severely, bellowing of a purported family relationship with an unbearably common girl and family, for all and sundry to hear. But he felt a strange sort of pride now, being able to claim the owner of a uniquely radish-shaped foil-pink tent to be his cousin now, all the more when that owner turned out to be dressed as a leprechaun.

"Draco!" she called excitedly, waving both her arms full of copies of the Quibbler: World Cup Final Special Edition. Draco waved his wand to levitate a few she dropped, saving them from the muddy ground.

"Look!" she said. When he safely levitated all her papers, her hands were free to show him the necklace she wore. The chain of real diamonds he'd bought along with the robin's egg-blue spiral of turquoise were dramatically at odds with her Ireland-green suit. He felt the tug to it, and tapped it to drop the spell before enfolding Luna in his arms, copies of the Quibbler

merrily dancing around them in the wind without dropping, while the sun finished its rise to full splendor above them.

"So you're selling copies?" Draco asked, and she looked nothing but proud of it.

"It's a special collectible edition," she said chipperly, showing off its metallic green foil cover.

"I want it, then," Draco laughed, directing one to his bag with his wand.

"Three sickles, please." Luna put them in a large, fluffy Snitch-shaped purse on her waist.

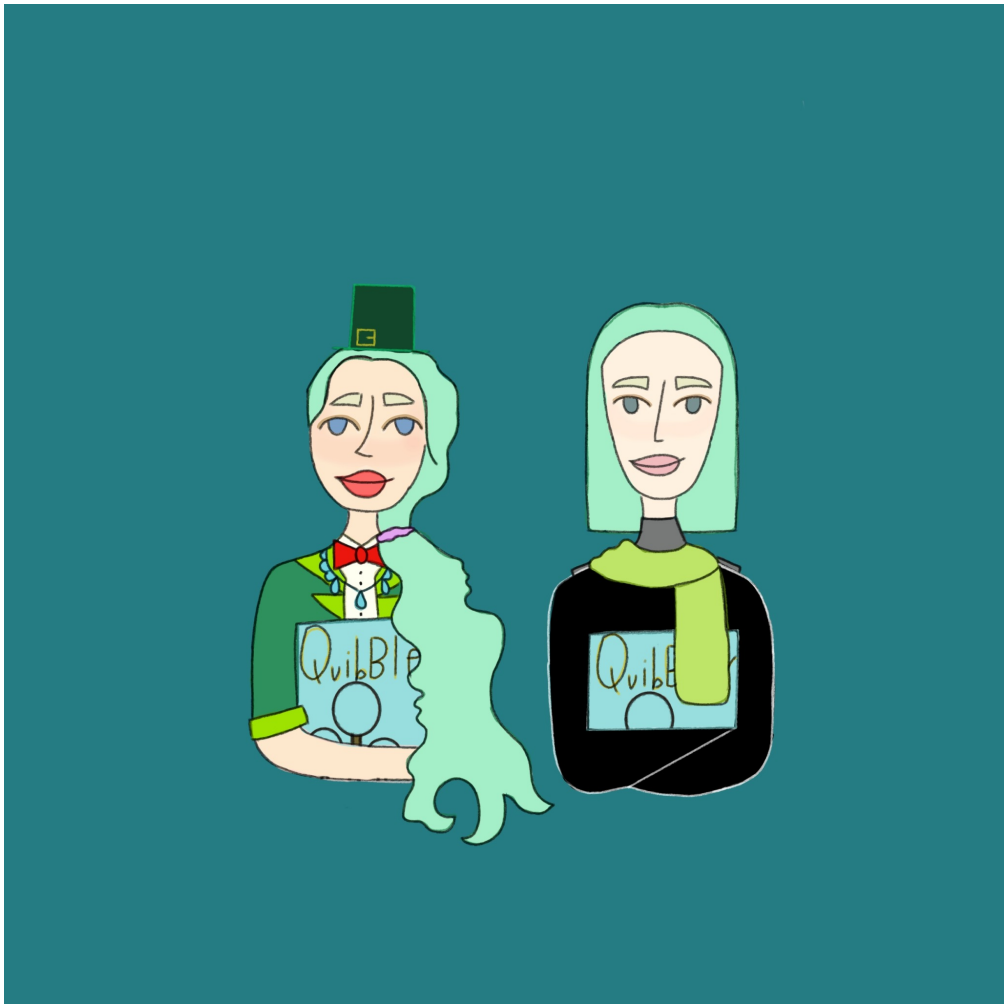
"That's so cute," Draco said, thinking of Ron's new owl from Sirius and imagining it collapsing under the weight of a few coins.

"Thank you," Luna said, and then her eyes widened with what she looked to find a marvelous idea. "Would you like to help me sell them?"

Draco almost immediately rejected the idea out of hand as impossibly demeaning, but...

"Why not?"

And so it was that Draco spent the morning exploring the vast spread of tents over the moors in the capacity of paper boy, teaching Luna the charms and motions to send the papers spiraling in a green cloud around them. On the way, Draco bought himself a long, lavish deep green Ireland scarf worth three galleons, four separate rounds of candy flosses for them, and charms to temporarily turn both of their hair a delicate, pale mint green for the occasion. Luna declared it suited him, with his scarf and dark green robes. It certainly suited her, her waving pale green mane flowing free behind her in the breeze like a flag, drawing the attention of more customers. By the time Draco's watch read noon, they were both so sugar high their hands were trembling. They both kept dropping coins into the grass, trying to fit them into Luna's overflowing purse.



It was in such a pose that they were found by Pansy, Millie, and the Greengrass girls. In the blue loop, Pansy had written letter after letter trying to get him to get her a seat with him in the Minister's box, and on his continued refusal, she had refused to hang out with him at the Cup. He hadn't realized she had still gone, just down mingling with the plebeians. He could only imagine what she thought of him, green-haired, selling floating Quibbler papers, with a cousin decked out as a leprechaun, fishing fallen sickles out of the mud-

"Oh, Draco, you look so cute!" Pansy shrieked. All of the girls but Millie made similarly high-pitched noises of agreement. Their collectively green garb was not actually a mark of their house, but Ireland garb of their own, albeit more feminine and becoming than Luna's. They fawned over Luna's hair as well as his, and Astoria Greengrass even complimented her green suit. According to Luna, Astoria was the friendliest of the Slytherin girls in the lower years, and often talked about Quidditch with Ginny Weasley. Not like that exactly spoke well to Astoria's taste in people from Draco's perspective, but she seemed genuinely appreciative of Luna as well.

"Thank you, Astoria, I like your scarf as well," Luna said politely- apparently they knew each other as well- and fell in beside her talking about their summers, as the Slytherin girls, wonders never ceasing, insisted on helping them sell the remaining copies. With the Greengrass girls on the case, they sold out before they had to stop for lunch. An amazed Luna said she hadn't expected to sell them all in the whole day and night. They sold like hotcakes even in the small knot of Bulgaria-decked tents, the supporters eager to add the Quibbler's

foldout poster, a scowling Krum straddling a large British lion, to flags of scowling Krum already streaming above them in the wind.

They sold the last two copies to Dean Thomas and Seamus Finnigan, decked out in green. They made faces at Draco for calling it *Slytherin green*, but perhaps not as dramatically as they might have, if he hadn't had this many Slytherin girls beside him. "Why is Malfoy always surrounded by girls?" Dean laughed. "He doesn't even like them, and he's like the pied bloody piper with them."

"That's right, Hermione and Ginny were asking after you too, Draco," said Seamus, and smiled at Astoria and tried to introduce himself. She slipped behind her sister and Luna, her supposed friendliness disappearing, and elegantly pretended Seamus didn't exist.

Understandable.

Dean and Seamus directed them to the Weasley tent, upon which the Slytherin girls found excuses to be elsewhere, and Draco tried casually to ask who else had come. Luna saw through him, as the mere thought of who could be there sent him nervously fussing with his hair. The Golden rose clasp still worked, although not as well as it had before all the snake blood had gotten on it. Luna let out her airy giggle. "Oh, there's someone specific he wants to be there," she said knowingly. Draco fought the urge to cast Deprimo on the ground to make a hole to crawl inside, until she added, "A certain dragontamer," and Draco's shoulders relaxed.

Dean and Seamus looked scandalized. "Wow, Luna, that's dirty," Dean laughed. "And Neville said you're a *nice* girl."

Luna looked blank. "Oh, Neville mentioned me? If you see him, tell him I said hello."

Luna hadn't understood the innuendo, just as the Gryffindors hadn't understood she meant it literally. "She means the dragontamer *Weasley*. Charlie. He used to be the Seeker for Gryffindor."

"Right!" Seamus said, nodding. "He was the last one to catch the Snitch all three matches in a year before you, right?"

"Exactly," said Draco. "Which is why I want to meet him." He leered, and leaned in to say for the boys but not Luna to hear, "It's not at all because he's said to be gay, totally fit, and his profession gives me the opportunity to make all kinds of dragon-related innuendo."

"Oh, right," Luna said, who always had better hearing than was convenient, and seemed to have caught up with the *dragontamer* insinuation belatedly. "Like how you'd like him to tame *you* with his whip as well."

Draco shook his head, trying not to laugh too much and encourage her, as they left a scandalized-looking Dean and Seamus. "We'll play footy together back at school, yeah?" he called backwards at Dean.

"Yeah," Dean called back, "If you survive the whip!"

Draco wiggled his eyebrows before turning back to Luna with more of a wince. "Bloody hell, Luna. However much that year with Riddle corrupted you, I'm afraid much more time with your favorite cousin will finish the job."

Luna got that darkness in her pale eyes for a moment that mention of Tom always seemed to put there, before she put on her usual false cheerfulness. "Tom didn't corrupt me," she said brightly. "He educated me and expanded my mind. And made me a murder puppet, but no one's perfect."

"You still curious?" Draco asked, lowering his voice as they passed tent after tent, pulling her aside before the hem of her long coat could catch on the violet fire some wizards were using to cook. "About him and my grandfather Abraxas? I talked to his portrait. Asked your questions."

"Yes!" Luna said, before looking down and chewing on her lower lip, downcast enough for once that he had to hold onto her arm to keep her from walking into any tents. They walked past a tent tethered with live peacocks. Draco fed them some remaining candy floss from his bag. Sugar had always gone down a treat with the Manor's albino ones, and these looked much less fierce.

"Father says it's not healthy for me to think about him so often. That I should forget that time in my life, pretend it never happened and move on. But I don't see how I could, even if I wanted to. It seems more useful to try and understand it somehow."

"I'd like to think surviving it made you stronger, Luna," Draco sighed. "Though more often having something terrible in your past just makes it harder to keep moving forward."

She took his hand and looked up at him as if he was some kind of actual authority. "Do *you* think it made me stronger?" she asked, a ruefulness in her pale eyes that made her look more rare and unusual than ever, as separate a changeling in the riotous waking world as he was. He put an arm around her while keeping her hand in his, and tugged on her long pale green hair.

"Luna," Draco said, "I didn't know you before. But whatever it's done, it didn't make you *weak*. You're more fearless than any Gryffindor I know."

She giggled, remarking on how unhappy her classmate Ginny would be to hear that. Draco refrained from remarking that he would enjoy witnessing Ginny Weasley experience as many forms of unhappiness as possible, before asking for details on Riddle. Which Draco censored somewhat for her tender young ears, while conveying the essentials. Yes, the other Slytherins in his year had heard he was a Muggleborn, but he'd impressed them enough that none had ever dared bully him. And they'd all known he was a half-blood descendant of Salazar Slytherin by the time they graduated. Yes, before their graduation from Hogwarts, Tom had formed an organization of proto-Death Eaters, and yes, it had been called the Knights of Walpurgis, though apparently it was no relation to Walburga Black. Thank Merlin, after what Draco had done to her portrait.

Luna seemed most interested, as he had feared she would be, at the reports he'd managed to secure of a sexual relationship of some sort between Riddle and Abraxas. Abraxas had denied

it thoroughly at first, but eventually the temptation of nostalgia had won out. With Draco's promise of secrecy, he'd waxed poetic about the many attractions of young Tom Riddle, both as a wizard and a man, until Draco was hard-pressed to get him to stop. It was clear by the end how much of Abraxas's initial loyalty to the Knights of Walpurgis was from a personal hold of Riddle's over Abraxas, as opposed to mere ideology or political ambition.

Politics sounded at least initially to have been a mere convenience for Abraxas, to ease his way to aligning with a man he already wanted to please. It had justified any contortion, in order for a moth to stay near green flame. It made Draco wonder, none too pleasantly, about how many early followers of the Dark Lord were been acquired through personal magnetism and a *hands-on* form of manipulation. It turned his stomach, with the associated memory of the noseless wonder he had known at Malfoy Manor, and the aunt who had adored him much the same in her time as well...

"Do you think he manipulated women the same way? Or just men? Oh, look, we're here..."

The two tents in the area marked off for *Weezly* were predictably patched, colorful, and shabby, and presumably enlarged inside if they were to have any hope of holding both Weasleys and guests. At least they had a strategic position, close to the pitch as possible, which would help with all the fleeing from Death Eaters- or would it hinder it, actually, put them closer to the action? Draco hung back at the door, wanting to finish the conversation, as well as giving himself a moment before he had to face those guests.

"Yeah, Luna, Riddle controlled women too," Draco said, voice going heavier. He chose not to count his little cousin in that group. "He wasn't exactly a gentleman in that regard. I know at least one woman who couldn't have been more madly in love with him." He took out his talon wand, turning it to show her who he meant without having to say the name. "Emphasis on the *mad*."

Luna nodded solemnly. "Yes. Our Aunt Bella. So do you think it was all for manipulation, with one or the other, or do you think he liked both?"

Draco snorted curtly. "Wouldn't put it past him. Not a great role model for bisexuals, but..."

"Bisexual," Luna said thoughtfully. "That's when you are attracted to both genders, right?"

Draco shrugged. "Yeah, it is. I don't happen to be, but it's a real thing. Even if people haven't heard of it, or like to put people in boxes, or claim they're indecisive or lying. It's real."

"Bisexual," Luna echoed, and then another voice echoed it too.

"Bisexual, that's when you like both? I think I might be that," said Harry Potter.

It was indeed Harry Potter who had emerged from the tent and spoken those words. Harry Potter, older than Draco had last seen him, a little less elfen or ethereal and a lot more solid. He was not nearly as unappealingly emaciated-looking as one might have hoped from those plaintive descriptions he'd written of his Muggles starving him. He had hair curling in disheveled waves past his ears now, thick dark eyebrows drawing the eyes forcefully to the brilliant green of his eyes, more of a sea-green ocean color than ever in the sunlight of noon

over the moor. Somehow, while his face had grown into his nose, his eyes just seemed to have gotten even bigger.

It was Harry Potter who had said that one word to ruin everything, from a boy whose every inch was chillingly perfect, from the toes in old trainers kicking a pile of firewood out of their way, to that soft thick hair currently played with by the fortunate wind-

"I, er, yeah," Harry said, faltering. "I mean, I talked a lot to Sirius this summer, over the two-way mirror you sent me, and he helped me figure out... yeah, I like both..."

Draco remembered Harry pressing a kiss to his cheek the last time they had seen each other, leaving school. Now those same lips said *bisexual*. It took too long for Draco to remind himself *he* was still who he was, and even a bisexual Potter would snog, say, a sentient umbrella, or a Basilisk's corpse, sooner than *Draco Malfoy*. His cheek felt those lips against it as if it had only just happened. He would have to offer an explanation to Luna for how stupidly it paralyzed him. And Luna could see, surely, what a statue that one word from Potter made a *Slytherin Malfoy dark wizard Death Eater coward,* so much more paralyzed than it should, because it had nothing to do with *him*-

Except Luna, bless her little heart, was jabbering away as nonchalantly as if Potter had just speculated on the sexuality of some distant acquaintance, and not the most famous boy in the wizarding world.

"Oh, Harry, that's wonderful," Luna said, and patted his hand. Draco nodded in awkward agreement. "It *is* quite good to be open about these things. Father's written in the Quibbler about all kinds of witches and wizards who've tried to suppress dark secrets about themselves- not just who they fall in love with, but the nature of their species or magic, or even their magic itself. Did you know that when a child grows up with his or her magic completely suppressed, they can create something called an Obscurus? We wrote about those a few years ago. Although sometimes the word is confused with what's called a Maledictus-"

"Maledictus," Draco said suddenly, seizing on his first chance to change the topic. "I met a maledictus this summer, I think. Or at least a Maledictum."

"*Did* you?" Luna exclaimed, seizing his arm again and pulling him into the Weasley tent. "Oh, Draco, how fascinating! You should have told me sooner!"

Luna was much more intrigued by the story of Maledictum than Potter's revelation, and devoted herself to dragging out details about the Augurey from Draco. Draco avoided looking at Potter as much as he could, and devoted himself anew to entertaining Luna, telling himself over and over all the while, *It has nothing to do with you.*

He'd sooner snog a Basilisk's corpse.

The Quidditch World Cup

Chapter Notes

Hey all! Really enjoying all your thoughts and comments so far. Thanks for letting me know I messed up Astoria Greengrass's year at Hogwarts lol. Went back and changed it! Sorry! ^^

Also, sorry for those who aren't vibing mentally with Draco with his hair length lol. It's pretty fundamental to his character, though, that he's consciously modeling himself after Severus. So please bear with it ^^ Check out the chin-length hair in the fanart for the last chapter here! And there is also another amazing fanart by Dreamsparkle of Draco here which shows a great image of how he would look, I think <3

Anyway, enjoy! <3

Playlist

The Weasley tent was a much-expanded space with myriad offenses against the principles of color coordination, feng shui, and common decency. Potter trailed behind Draco and Luna with the most unspeakably awkward look on his face, looking like he was waiting for any chance to leap in, but too polite and already too mortified to dare interrupt. Draco and Luna fell into quite a comfortable discussion, talking about arcane magical creatures, while Potter hovered in the background.

Potter only got in a word edgewise when Luna asked about the tent, which he said they had set up themselves. Draco managed to avoid making a face at the mention of manual labor, and almost not to let that cast his mind towards that extra bit more the athlete's muscles in Potter's lean shoulders and biceps had filled out over the summer. "We didn't even have the eldest three to help," Potter said, in what sounded an insecure sort of bragging, and then Luna's giggle and surreptitious look at Draco made him turn to Draco suspiciously in turn. "What? What's so funny?"

Somehow Draco doubted Potter would appreciate any series of remarks on older men, dragonhide, and whips, so soon after his not-so-tender coming out moment. They were soon interrupted, anyway, by Ron, Hermione, and Ginny, coming out of a deeper room with Mr. Weasley, where Hermione was trying with apparent difficulty to explain to Mr. Weasley how to work some sort of small Muggle fire-making sticks. "So you just rub them together?" Mr. Weasley was asking skeptically.

"'Of course, a fire! But there's no wood'," Draco called out, quoting her and Ron, "'Are you a witch or not?' 'Oh no! Incendio!'" Potter, Ron, and Hermione all started to laugh in recognition of the memory, while the others looked confused.

"Wicked, mate," Ron said with a shake of his head. "Hey, Luna, think you two could share some of that hair stuff with us?"

"I'm sorry, Ronald, I don't think it would suit you," Luna said, honestly if brutally. Draco stifled his laughter, as Potter and Hermione knelt beside the fire to attempt assistance at fire-making to Mr. Weasley, who seemed bound and determined to do it the Muggle way. The Statute of Secrecy was being overused here, in Draco's humble opinion, but no one ever liked to hear opinions about Muggle relations from someone with a Death Eater father. Funny, that. So Draco left them at it, before picking up a piece of wood, and taking it inside to set it on fire. Only Potter followed, since Luna had taken his glasses to try and use it to concentrate the sunlight and make a flame. It sounded dubious, but she claimed she'd read about it once, and Hermione said it should be possible.

"Draco," Potter sighed, squinting as his bare eyes looked to struggle to adjust to the abrupt change in light, "You aren't going to use magic, are you?" Draco had thought going inside to do it, outside the gaze of any possible Muggles, had been if anything a show of maturity on his part. But it seemed Potter's inconvenient sense of fairness was rearing its head again.

"Not at all," Draco said, and handed the wood to him. "Wanna see something cool?"

"I don't have my glasses," Potter said, as if Draco was the one half-blind.

"Very well," Draco drawled, "You'd better make sure and come close, then, Potter." It was better than anything he had felt since the press of Potter's lips to his cheek on Platform 9 and 3/4, the sight of Potter coming closer, green eyes all exposed like someone was meant to kiss that bare trusting face, as Potter stepped right up to the boy who promised to set things on fire.

"Here," Draco said, drawing his wand, and concentrating very hard to control his magic. "Lacarnum inflamari." When Potter tried to jump back, Draco grabbed his hand to hold him at his side, before using his wand to hold the fireball in the air, compressing it together smaller and brighter. Then he pocketed his wand and held out both hands, so it came close enough for him to cup in his palms, the warmth a swimming melting feeling over his skin, and surely Potter's too from right next to him. "No glasses needed to see this, are there?"

"It's very bright," Potter said, licking his lips and biting them, fidgeting as he stared between Draco and the fire, side half-pressed against Draco's, smelling of grass and sweat and woodsmoke already. "You'd better be careful, Draco, or you could burn this entire tent down."

"Does it look like I don't what I'm doing?" Draco laughed. He had no idea why he was letting himself show off, flashing his palms open and making the fireball expand again. It turned to wisping shapes that fit to the edge of each fingertip, where he could draw in the air with them. The fireball became more of a nebula, with the room obliging him and making itself darker with inky shadow around them.

"Want to see me make it bigger? Hotter?" Draco smirked and narrowed his icy eyes. It felt like Potter had chosen that time to come out to him to expressly mess with his head. "How hot can you stand it, Potter?"

Potter was sweating more than before, a bead of it running down his face and catching distractingly over the curve of his top lip. "You think you're so impressive, don't you?"

"Am I not?" said Draco, and nonchalantly tripled the heat of the fireball, turning it blue and then to the charmed green of Severus's fire. As if it was nothing, and he hadn't spent the past several weeks doing almost nothing but practice this spell in wake of his assessment, along with nearly completing work on Hermione's new charm for her birthday. He'd expected to have to spend a lot more of the summer learning Portkey-related spells, but compared to, say, Expecto patronum, that homework for the coming year had been child's play.

Draco concentrated until the shade of green deepened, matching almost to Potter's eyes. He could see it reflected in Potter's pupils. *This* was the greenest they had ever looked, lips parted in wonder with that bead of sweat and another dripping between them-

"And here I thought I left all the dragons in Romania," said a brash male voice, and the room went light again. Draco instinctively drew his wand to destroy the incriminating magic, but he forgot how to destroy it instantly.

"Incendio glacius," he said, mimicking what he had seen the assessor do, and then they had a great deal of electric green-ice, hovering between the two of them and Charlie Weasley.

Charlie looked every inch a dragontamer, built like a brick house. His shoulders and bare arms were wrought with visible ridges of muscle under his Ireland kit with the sleeves cut off, thighs in ripped black jeans solid enough to show the arch of more muscles under the broad rips. He had ginger hair lightened with sun, and struck a different figure from any other Weasley Draco had seen, even not taking into account the freckled tan, or the gash-like scar on one arm and relatively new-looking dragon burn on another.

Charlie had tilted his head and eyed the green ice with interest. "If Mr. Weasley has drinks," Draco said mildly, "We'll have patriotic ice with them. Accio bowl." A metal bowl came flying out to him from the depths of the tent. Thank Merlin the Weasleys had happened to bring one, or he would have just looked very dumb in front of Potter.

Draco let the ice fall with enough speed into the bowl that some of it shattered, and he applied a careful slight Reducto to break it into rough cubes. "There, up the Irish."

"Me and Bill and Percy just got here," Charlie said, "In time for the food. Dad's gotten the fire going and the sausages cooking. We Apparated in," he told Draco, and extended a large freckled hand. "I'm Charlie Weasley. Were we at school together? I think I would have remembered."

"No," Draco said, "And from the hair, I had at least *hoped* you weren't a particularly shameless burglar, although the Boy Who Lived does find himself conveniently without glasses, should you be attempting an even more brazen assassination. Draco Malfoy."

"Charmed," Charlie said, face breaking into an indeed very charmed-looking smile, and shook Draco's hand heartily before Potter physically inserted himself, forcing Charlie to pull away.

"Come on, we shouldn't keep everyone else waiting," Potter said, and picked up Draco's discarded piece of wood and virtually dragged them out.

Draco was reunited with Peter, none too sentimentally, and then introduced to the final Weasley of the set. This was another non-Weasley-looking one called Bill, with an earring and *ponytail*, a Curse-Breaker. He had the seat at the fire beside the twins, and was chomping happily on an extremely blackened sausage. Charlie seemed the Weasley most interested to get to know Draco, perhaps because of his name. "Draco, is it? Like the Latin for dragon?" he asked, and when Draco sat beside Hermione, Charlie took the seat on his other side before Potter could.

It was hard to focus on conversing with Charlie after, when Hermione was then being imposed upon to share her wood stump with an insistent Potter, but Draco made the attempt.

"Yes, it is," Draco said, "I'm very fond of dragons, show him, Striker," and had to practically drape himself over Potter to drag Hermione's wrist with her bracelet over to show Charlie the baby dragon tooth on it. Charlie was obligingly impressed by the bracelet, though he sounded more impressed by the transfiguration when Hermione told him it was Draco's. The period of inspection left Draco leaned over Potter, his side and thigh braced on his. Luna handed over Potter's glasses to return to him. Draco automatically put them back on his face for him, and might have fallen into the fire when he felt the back of his knuckles happen to brush Potter's lips.

"And I work in Romania with dragons," Charlie said with a laugh, serving Draco and Potter sausages of theirs, and handing Bill the ice to distribute with the water that Potter's trio had apparently gathered earlier. "Some call that a dragontamer. The jokes write themselves, don't they?"

"Do they?" Potter cut in, and gulped down a full cup of green-tinged water like it had done something to offend him. "In my experience, Draco isn't the kind to really like talk of being *tamed*."

"I don't know," Draco drawled, trying and almost succeeding in keeping his eyes on Charlie and not Potter as he quipped, "I think it would depend who it was trying to put me in my place..."

Potter gobbled down his food like he was in some sort of speed contest, and then yet another cup of water disappeared to his savage attentions, sweating as much as he had with the fireball nearby, making quite the spectacle. Draco nearly forgot Charlie was on his other side, despite the quips they kept exchanging, until Charlie asked him if his hair was always green.

"I don't know," Draco said, and crossed his legs, leaning back and turning his head around showily to display it. "Do you think it suits me?"

Charlie didn't get the chance to answer. "Everything *suits* you, Draco," Potter said crossly, "But that doesn't mean your hair should stay *green*. It's all in your face now, you-" He reached up and felt, and gave Draco a puzzled look when he saw that he was wearing the golden rose clasp and still had hair in his eyes. "Is the enchantment on the clasp I gave you not working anymore?"

Draco winced guiltily. "Um, yeah, it has... attenuated, but- don't look so guilty, Potter, it was a perfectly good present, it just had some, erm, difficulties- I don't think it was designed to deal with that much snake blood on it- no, don't ask, it's a grim story-"

"Why are you like this?" Potter murmured, eyes softening with fondness, only for Charlie to start speaking at Draco's other side.

"Sounds like you live an interesting life, Draco. You might make a good dragontamer."

Draco laughed, preening at the attention. "I don't know. Rather than hold the whip, I think I'd like to know how it feels to be at the end of one."

He'd lowered his voice enough for Potter not to hear, but Charlie hadn't, looking too taken with Draco to notice Potter eavesdropping so hard. "You'd look pretty good," Charlie said, "At the end of a whip," and Draco hoped Potter was innocent enough not to understand that. But anyone would have understood what Charlie was getting at when he lowered his voice finally, leaned his shoulder on Draco's, and laughed, "Whatever boyfriend- girlfriend, whoever you have- must not know what to do with you, if you've never been at the end of... proper discipline." Potter seemed to catch that, leaning over straining to hear like his life depended on it. "Or is there no one in your life, Draco, to... how did you put it? Put you in your place?"

"Of course not," Potter snapped, with something of the aggression he'd used for Tom Riddle in the Chamber of Secrets. Draco couldn't understand why he was this upset. Did Mr. I'm-Bisexual-Now fancy Charlie himself? "Draco doesn't have anyone he's dating, because he's a *fourth-year*. In Ron and I's year. He's *fourteen.* How old are you, Charlie? 25?" Or yeah, maybe Potter was just a huge goody-two shoes when it came to someone flirting with an older man.

"Um, 21?" Charlie said, face paling, and hurriedly pulled back from Draco's side.

With a sinking feeling, Draco looked up and realized they'd attracted the attention of all of the others, Mr. Weasley looking ready to die of fatherly mortification, and Peter ready to deliver some rejoinder on the situation he no doubt thought would be clever, and absolutely wouldn't be.

"Shit, sorry- bloody hell, I thought- you're fourteen? You don't seem *fourteen*- Merlin, I thought you were closer to *my* age- your magic- that fireball- and that transfiguration- fourteen, oh *fuck*-"

"Language, Charlie," Mr. Weasley said, in a tone clearly admonishing him for more than that, and Draco held up a hand to forestall Peter's smart comment.

"No harm done," Draco said with a bright smile, and threw an arm around Charlie. "No harm in joking around, everyone. Bloody bunch of busybodies. Now, are we here to watch some Quidditch, or for Potter to cause drama for no reason?"

Everyone else let it go readily enough, and the day fell back into its normal festive rhythm. Ludo Bagman and Bartemius Crouch Sr. from the Ministry came around soon after, the former making a sizable bet with the Weasley twins, against their proposition that Krum would catch the Snitch but Ireland would still win. Draco was pleased to know from the blue loop that they were right, and Mr. Weasley was panicking for nothing. In fact, witnessing that betting put him in mind of the terrible number of lucrative opportunities he'd been ignoring...

Crouch was an unpleasant, blustering sort, and he looked even more taken aback than Bagman to find a green-haired Malfoy at the Weasley fire, let alone the green-haired girl Draco introduced as his cousin. He only had the small amusing merit of referring to Peter as 'Weatherby'. He alluded to the Triwizard Tournament, but refused to give anything away, nor did Mr. Weasley or Peter, who called it classified information that Crouch had been 'quite right not to disclose'.

Draco couldn't resist that cue. "Oh, you mean that it's the Triwizard Tournament this year?" he said nonchalantly, and got everyone's attention. "What?" he said, giving Peter an innocent look at the death stare that earned him. "My father told me."

Much of the afternoon that followed was dominated by discussion of the tournament, then, as well as the fast-approaching final, with the Weasley twins sticking to his side anxious for news about this other money-making opportunity. Draco wished he could reassure them their bet was going to work out. Ron seemed more interested in the glory, but he was certainly interested. Hermione began going on about how terribly dangerous it all sounded, and how irresponsible Dumbledore was bringing it back if there had been that many deaths...

And so the afternoon wound down, and Draco hardly had another moment alone with Potter to tell him off for his pushiness before the match was soon to start. One came outside the tent at last when the sun was setting. Draco lingered outside while the others went in to gather supplies, and didn't even have to ask to make Potter stay outside with him.

"Potter," Draco began, stepping close and lowering his voice so no gossips at nearby tents would go making a mountain out of a molehill. "At lunch- what did you think you were-"

"Did you hear me say earlier I'm bi?" Potter blurted, and Draco nearly swallowed his tongue.

"Um," Draco said very intelligently.

"Bisexual," Potter said earnestly, as if that needed clarification.

Draco was not the one acting like an idiot here. He drew himself up to his full height, wishing his hair wasn't green, and did his best to sound superior. "Yes, Potter, my ears did not happen to miraculously cease functioning at that interval, much as they might have been damaged, say, in second year, by certain individuals incessantly yammering on about oneself being the Heir of Slytherin. Is there any relevance to this reminder of your recent announcement, or have I merely proved remiss in offering a sufficient quantity of congratulations for this feat of

Gryffindor courage in your coming out, leaving aside that I did the same in *first year*?" Not that it was a competition.

"I told Ron and Hermione already," Potter said, ignoring his sarcasm. "And Sirius and Remus. Talking to Sirius through the mirror you gave me really helped, so, um... thank you?"

"You're welcome, Potter," Draco said, struggling with the realization that Potter had apparently been dead serious about that proclamation. "I'm glad you've realized your attraction to a multiplicity of genders, given that being Famous Saint Harry Potter and the Chosen One and all that, you will no doubt find yourself in advancing years the object of affection of not merely males and females but everything in between, many people and a wide variety of species- flora and fauna-"

"I don't want attention from lots of people or any of that," Potter began, and took a deep breath. "I just want-" Draco tilted his head, and Potter looked down, reddening. "Never mind."

"Draco?" Of all the voices it could be, it had to be Mother's, striding up to the tent and staring down at the *Weezly* sign as if it was a poisonous snake she needed Draco to magically behead for her. "Draco, is that you?" The green hair couldn't look that lurid in the falling light, but she was looking at him and then Harry Potter at his side as if her son had been replaced by a stranger.

"Hello, Mother," Draco sighed, and then looked at her with amazement. "What are you doing in the tent city? You? I wouldn't thought you'd be caught dead here-"

"You," she said, in a small clipped voice that ignored the presence of Potter entirely, though surely she had to know who he was, "Are extremely late already. Your father expected you to find us an hour ago. He's already been having drinks with the Minister, and-"

"Hello, Mrs. Malfoy," Potter said, inserting himself forward with an outstretched hand. "You must be Draco's mother. I'm Harry Potter. I'm in his year at Hogwarts." *Wow, Potter, she could never have guessed without you telling.* "It's a pleasure to meet you. The others will want to-"

"I have already," Mother said in her most exquisite clipped voice, "Met several of Draco's friends. Miss Granger and Miss Lovegood have come to the Manor." She let Potter touch her gloved hand for mere seconds before snatching it away.

"The Weasleys will want to meet you," Potter said obliviously.

"If only there were time," Mother said thinly. "Come along, sweetheart."

Potter reached out and touched Draco's hand. "See you after the match?"

Draco's forced smile froze on his face. "I don't think so," he had to say, and followed his mother into the growing dusk.

It was a twenty minute walk through the forest, but Draco and his mother made it in more like fifteen. "Why must you continue to associate with those people?" she kept asking in one form or another, making excuses for him with Luna and even Hermione, but finding Potter and the Weasleys beyond the pale, whatever feeble justifications Draco offered. Halfway down the path, green and red lanterns lit up above them, Gryffindor-Bulgaria and Slytherin-Ireland, like Christmas somewhere other than Malfoy Manor. That made Mother walk all the faster.

"Your shoes, Mother," he said in dismay, but she dragged him along with little concern.

They were caught in a great mass of humanity, streaming before and behind them, with only a small head start on the influx forward. His mother grimaced whenever anyone came near to brushing her. Draco kept himself between her and the rest of the path, eyes open for anyone whose presence would displease her. Not many were fit to be so much as placed before the eyes of a daughter of the house of Black, much less touch her. Draco had used to find that exemplary in his mother. Now he found it an irritation, and remembered Mrs. Granger's brilliant smile in the photo of them all at Highbury, remembered Mrs. Weasley's pride as she explained their kitchen clock, with each of their faces watched lovingly... *Stop whining, Draco. It could be worse. She's not her sister.*

They climbed the deep violet stairs up to the top box, with its row of purple and golden chairs that Draco knew would soon be expanded further to let in more Bulgarians at the last minute. He'd been so self-conscious last time, when he'd realized that Potter would be there with his degenerate Gryffindor posse en masse. It had almost entirely spoiled the experience, whatever part of it had been left when he'd known about the carnage primed to follow. Now the promise of being joined by Weasleys was one of the small consolations. He could only sit down, try and forget about said impending carnage, and wish Luna had taken him up on sitting up here, rather than in the stands with her father.

It was surreal to see a hundred thousand wizards, thinking how impossible such an event would have been only two or three years later, once the wizarding world had broken out into war. Yet the war had not taken so long the first time that the 1998 Quidditch World Cup should be prevented from being played, even if it had been in England and not Russia. It was stupefying in the figurative and almost the literal spell sense, the vertigo of looking down on so very many people wrapped in this diffuse golden light, with the knowledge that the reproduction of this sight in Russia in four years depended so much on his actions. That the fate perhaps of every single person hinged on him, and not just the two dozen or so who would fill this highest box. That faceless mass of red and green and gold would live in fear or safety depending on the choices he made, with the knowledge only he had of the blue loop, while his own foolishness with that still-unknown mirror had erased the chance for them to have nearly all their safety secured in the future already.

And said potential savior or destroyer of the multitude beneath had spent the past few weeks in his bedroom carving turquoise into a dragon, and in his cellars playing with fireballs. Charming. It was a wonder the Chosen One could resist such a paragon of virtue and dedication.

Despite Mother's complaints, the only other person there was a house elf. So Father was evidently off hobnobbing with the Minister elsewhere still. It figured that Draco and Mother would move faster than that old blowhard Fudge. The elf was Crouch Sr.'s, Draco recalled, and she bore a startling resemblance to Dobby that made him go over to greet her, however Mother wrinkled her nose. If he recalled correctly, did this tea towel-clad elf not get the blame for the Dark Mark, freed from her family as a punishment? "Hi," said Draco, sliding into the seat beside her. "Winky, right?"

Her big dark brown marble eyes looked gobsmacked to have this bizarre green-haired boy be speaking to her and know her name. "My name is Winky, sir! Winky is not knowing you, sir, Winky is very sorry..."

"My name is Draco Malfoy," Draco said, and he could see that from her widening eyes she knew the surname, at least. Elves tended to be more aware of inter-family politics, he had learned from Dobby, than their owners ever gave them credit for. "Are you alright?" She was hiding her face behind her hands like she thought he might hit her. "I'm not angry at you, Winky, don't hide."

"It is not that, Draco Malfoy," Winky said, still shielding her face. "I is not liking heights at all, but my master sends me to the Top Box and I comes, sir. Master wants Winky to save him a seat, Draco Malfoy, he is very busy. So Winky is sitting here waiting for Master."

Draco considered, and though the fear of heights she showed was objectively ridiculous, her resemblance to Dobby made it seem grotesque to simply go back to his mother and leave her sitting there cringing, hiding like the stadium was about to be assaulted by Dementors. If heights were her worst fear, actually, it would be very much like that. "To save the seat, all you have to do is sit there," Draco said thoughtfully. "But you're hiding the view. So it would be easier if you didn't have to see, right?" She nodded shakily. "Here, Winky, I'm going to make you something."

Draco took his wand and tapped it on the gilt edge of one of the chairs, then a small drop of gold fell to the ground. He left it there, and cast Orchideous to conjure a bouquet of flowers. He remembered the assessment, and used a Placement charm to stick the bottom of the stems to the ground, then cast Herbivicus and made the stems rocket up, entwining in a flowered net to shield Winky's vision from everywhere that scared her. He heard her make a startled sound that he hoped was a good sign. He finished by lifting the seed-like bit of gold, casting Spongify, and dragging it through the air and encasing the blossoms in it, making it a lovely thicket of golden roses.

"There, Winky! You couldn't see anything if you wanted to! Aren't you less scared? Your master can just vanish it when he comes and needs the seat."

"Winky is happy not to have to see," Winky's voice came shakily from behind, and he could still make out flashes of her wide brown marble eyes. "But the flowers is so beautiful, Draco Malfoy. Winky is sad to hear they will go away."

Draco smiled to himself at the praise, even from that squeaky voice. "Well, I can just unstick them from the floor if you like. You can take them with you after, how's that? And..." He lowered his voice conspiratorially, and whispered, "You can't tell anyone I said this, Winky,

but if you get scared sometime later, if you hear screams or see people flying from the sky, don't run away, just stay where your master tells you, where it's safe, and hide behind the flowers. Only pay attention to those, like a trance, and everything will be alright. Promise, Winky?"

"Winky promises," Winky said resolutely, and Draco laughed and sat back on his heels.

"And there we have it," Draco said, "No more scary heights. If only all of the world's problems were so easy to solve." He yawned and stretched, getting to his feet, only to be met by a round of applause. The Weasleys and guests had made it to the box, and as seemed as pleased by his display of creativity as his mother seemed embarrassed.

"You," Mother said icily, loud enough for all of them to hear, "Are lucky your father was not here to witness that display."

"I agree," Peter Weasley said loftily. "The Decree for the Reasonable Restriction of Underage Sorcery is followed *quite* laxly these days." He earned such a cold stare from Mother, for his temerity to speak to her, that he scrambled into his own seat red-faced, like a mole popping its head back underground. The Weasley twins cracked up in unison, as did their other older brothers. The younger Weasleys, though, came over with their guests to examine the flowers Draco had embellished. Draco explained why he had conjured it up for Winky, which she enthusiastically endorsed from behind her cocoon.

"The great dread Heir of Slytherin," Hermione laughed, ruffling his hair affectionately, while Potter leaned it to sniff at one of the blossoms.

"It still smells like proper roses," Potter said in amazement, "Even with the gold over it."

"There are roses like that," Draco said absently, "I was thinking of a particular one," and Ginny's noise of confusion alerted him to how that made Potter turn red, and fall from crouching to sitting beside the rose thicket. "Golden roses at Malfoy Manor," Draco corrected hastily, over-sharing in embarrassment. "There's a great many under our terrace gardens, winter flowers, 'Mione- last Christmas, Pansy Parkinson cursed one of my eyes out over them, so yes, fond memories-"

"She did what?" Hermione shrieked, but Draco diverted them with pointing out the incredible view. So it was that the Minister of Magic found Draco sitting on the ground in a knot of Gryffindors, beneath a house elf trapped in a gilded rose bush.

"Mr. Potter," Fudge greeted Potter, who got up to shake his hand, though hardly so officiously as Peter, who broke his glasses bowing. Draco stayed sitting, remembering the man's ostrich strategy when it came to Voldemort. When Fudge made his best condescending effort to greet Potter's friends, his resources went completely dry when it came to a green-haired Draco. "And, ah, you must be, ah..."

"This is Draco," Hermione offered helpfully, and Fudge's gaze perked up, as if he might not be wasting his time as much after all.

"Of course, of course, Draco Malfoy, I hardly recognized you with your, er... charming festive hair. I'm told you are already a most talented and accomplished young wizard. And your friend, this young lady?"

"Yes, indeed," Draco said, pulling Hermione up beside him, and put an arm around her. "The most intelligent young person you will ever meet, my dear friend Hermione Granger."

"The... Grangers?"

"She's Muggleborn," Draco said, "And better with a wand than anyone."

Draco saw the interest fall out of Fudge's gaze, a barely suppressed contempt crossing his eyes before he could suppress it and return to the vapid brown-nosing manner he used for a Malfoy. "Ah, of course. You look just like your father, young man."

"What an awful thing to say to someone," Ron muttered nearby. Draco shouldn't have, but he joined in helpless laughter with the rest of them. Fudge looked bewildered, the distaste crossing his face again as he looked over at Ron, like a bad smell had polluted his nose, and a vindictiveness tightened in Draco's chest. But he couldn't exactly use Langlock on the Minister of Magic. As Fudge made a show of knowing Potter to the Bulgarian Minister, Draco exchanged glances with his friends, and gave them a mischievous version of that look Hermione called 'Extra-Frankenstein', which in this case meant *Shut up and let me work.*

And Draco could see Father making his way over to Mother. "Say, Minister," Draco drawled, "Come sit by me and my mother, won't you? She was just saying before, how glad she was for our family to make such a generous contribution to St Mungo's Hospital. And so *kind* of you to invite us as your guests." Draco could see Father spotting Arthur Weasley. A look of dislike crossed his face with at least more honesty to give it grace than Fudge's drooling toady visage. But Draco distracted his father as well as the minister, buttering him up and making all kinds of vague inconclusive intimations towards further charitable joint endeavors.

"Of course, you aren't just a charitable man, are you, Minister Fudge?" Draco simpered, and waited for Mother and Father to get distracted chatting with the Bulgarian Minister before launching his real offensive. "I've heard you're quite the sporting man as well. You must have a uniquely prescient take on events to come."

Fudge foiled him by declaring he thought Ireland would win, but that there was a chance Krum would catch the Snitch for Bulgaria in the process. He said it loud enough for the Weasley twins to look self-satisfied, and Bagman to overhear and blanch, turning away from Crouch Sr.'s complaints about his elf being *surrounded with bloody roses*. "My friends have said so as well," Draco said with an obliging smile, "And they *are* great Quidditch players at Hogwarts, Minister, so I have no reason to doubt their or your penetration of the game. Now, Mr. Bagman bet the opposite against him, but surely the Head of the Department of Magical Games and Sports would not have the same instincts as real Quidditch players. Did you know I myself play Quidditch?"

"Do you?" Fudge said, visibly doubting his own instincts, and Draco smelled blood.

"Indeed," Draco said, with an indulgent smile. "As a Seeker, I know the importance of the Seeker position myself. I caught the Snitch in all three matches at Hogwarts this year, and Slytherin did *win* each of those matches, but certainly there are *some* matches where the opposite occurs..." Draco artfully left out that Slytherin had still lost the Quidditch Cup. "So if I were a betting man, Minister," Draco said, checking his watch high in the air and deliberately making a show of inspecting its lovely gilt engravings, "I would bet as my young Weasley friends did, not as Mr. Bagman, and bet that Krum would catch the Snitch but Ireland would win. I'd bet my watch on it."

"Quite a lovely watch," Fudge said, with a shifty look in his eyes, and why was this so easy?

"Oh, thank you," Draco said with a subservient little head-lowering smile, a feminine affectation that had the disgusting old man inclining closer, the way men tended to when his mother did the same. "Nothing compared to yours- a J.B. Yabsley, isn't it? Mine only has the recommendation that it was a gift from Harry Potter. Engraved with his dedication. *From your friend Harry Potter*," Draco lied at the end, and took off the watch and flashed the inside, but so quickly in the harsh floodlights that Fudge wouldn't see the lack of inscription.

The minute Draco said Harry Potter, he had him. "Say, Draco," Fudge said, with an offensive sort of familiarity, and eyed his wrist like the watch was already half-his. "What do you say we make a bet amongst gentleman? Take the same bet your friends made with a ministry official. I bet Ireland will win, and Aidan Lynch will catch the Snitch, and you bet Ireland will win but Krum will catch it. Do you like *my* watch, young man? Why don't we bet those?"

"But you wear that watch everywhere you go, Minister," Draco said, widening his eyes innocently at him. "I couldn't possibly..."

"Nonsense, my boy," said Fudge, with all the graciousness of a man who never expected to lose. "You stand as our witness, Lucius. It's a bet." Father, who had just returned, looked at Draco suspiciously, but Draco gave him a beatific smile. *Didn't you bring me here to network with the Minister of Magic? See, aren't I doing a wonderful job?*

Perhaps there were more virtuous ways to use the blue loop, but few had been as satisfying as watching the pre-match show and then the match play out just as he had remembered. He watched the look on the Minister's face rather than the action, as Krum launched a Wronski Feint that sent Lynch crashing down and needing the attention of mediwizards, and then the false hope on the man's face as Krum got a bloody nose. Fudge leaned forward in his chair, and gave a longing quick gaze down at Draco's wrist, before jumping up and screaming for Lynch as he rocketed after the Snitch, with a bloodied Krum late to follow.

But Draco had seen this all before, and needed no reminder of both Seekers nearly crashing, Lynch completely wiping out and being charged by angry Veela. Krum emerged blood-covered but victorious, holding the Snitch in the air as if he hadn't just cost his country the cup, and the Minister of Magic his trademark pocket watch.

170-160, the dolt. Really? Except Potter was calling out defense of his fellow Seeker, applauding like crazy for his future tournament rival and claiming Krum had known the Irish Chasers were too good, and had wanted to end it on his own terms. *No, he's just a blunderbus*

who can't do basic math, Potter. I can see why your lot are such fans. But Draco couldn't have been any more grateful for the Bulgarian blunderbus's continued errors across timelines, as not only he got to turn to the Minister of Magic with an expression of saintly remorse for his own triumph, but the Weasley twins got to turn up to surly old Bagman with outstretched hands. And Draco didn't have to feel quite as stupid as he would have with this bloody sparkly mint green hair.

"Vell, ve fought bravely," a sad voice said from behind, the Bulgarian Minister slumping over to Fudge, with a slight smirk showing underneath the dour face of sport disappointment.

"You can speak English!" said Fudge, to whom indignity had just been added to insult. "And you've been letting me mime everything all day!"

"Vell, it vos very funny," said the Bulgarian Minister, shrugging. "Now give ze boy hees vatch."

Father seemed to catch on to events, and jumped to his feet, looking between Draco and the Ministers with desperation not to let his son humiliate the Minister in front of his peers. Bagman, Crouch, the Weasleys, and nearly all the occupants of the box had caught on from Father's reaction that something notable was going on. "We can discuss this later," Father said tightly, "The Cup will be brought into the Top Box in seconds, there is no time to settle debts," and Draco gave Fudge his most naive childish look, sticking out his lower lip.

"No, it's alright, Minister, you don't *have* to give me your watch," he said sadly, pouting for all the world and soon the cameras to see. "I would have given you mine, but I'm sure it's different for the Minister of Magic. You don't have to fulfill your promises to *children*-"

It was with a howl of agonized fury that Fudge ripped off the decades-old custom pocket watch, which he had worn every day since back when he still had all his hair. He positively threw it at the mint-haired fourth year who was its new rightful owner, just in time to avoid the arrival of the cameras. Bulgaria came first doing the *loser walk*, as Vince had always termed it, and Draco watched Hermione carefully for her reaction to Krum passing by. *Look alive, Striker, it's your future Yule Ball date. Sure, he might not have basic math skills, but at least he has the merit of not having shared a bed for years with Peter Pettigrew.*

Father was spitting mad as they made their way out of the stadium, into the woods along the lantern-lit path. Mother headed towards the Apparition point like last time, and Father directed Draco to follow her, unlike in the blue loop, where he'd told Draco to wait in the woods for him. Draco didn't know whether that was lack of faith in Draco's ability to stay out of the conflict this time, with his manifestly divided loyalties, or just punishment for the comeuppance he'd served the Minister. Draco just smirked, nodding obediently, and had every intention of obeying.

Until he remembered that he hadn't just waited in the woods silently the first time. He'd warned the Gryffindors about the risk to Hermione, albeit in the most unpleasant manner possible. Half of him even then might have been obliquely trying to warn them off, to keep Potter away from a situation where he could get himself killed with ill-advised heroics. If he wasn't there to warn them this time, would there be a risk they wouldn't all come out of it as spotless as before?

There was a risk regardless, because there was another variable in their little group that would likely be there this time, thanks to Draco forcibly inserting it into their lives early: Draco's absent-minded cousin, who as a pureblood was theoretically safe, but liable to wander into danger at the best of times. Let alone the risk she could pose to less pureblooded friends, who would never leave her behind. And Luna would be celebrating with them. She'd told Draco about their plans to meet up after the final, whatever the result, and pleaded in vain for him to say he'd join them...

"I have to go," Draco blurted, and turned on his heel and sprinted away from the Apparition point. He heard his mother calling after him, but he soon disappeared into the knot of festive Irish fans. When he turned back, even if she'd tried to pursue him, neither of them could see each other anymore.

The Dark Mark

Chapter Notes

> Hey guys! If there's some confusion about the Langlock, Draco's tongue does not prevent him from sharing information from the future. Where it has locked has been when he directly tries to say he is from the future. He can't say, for instance, "An enchanted mirror sent me back in time," but he could say, "Voldemort is going to rise again" or "Lupin is going to die" or something like that. And the "are you 25" thing was not an intentional reference- that's cool that was in Scott Pilgrim lol
>
> Anyway, enjoy! <3
>
> Playlist

"Avenseguim!"

Draco followed the tug to Luna, fearing it would again fail him in a moment of danger like with Hermione and the Basilisk. But he found Luna right at the end of the pull, with as many Weasleys around her as any reasonable person could hope for. Hermione and Potter were with them, flushed triumphant faces illuminated by the sparkling green fireworks above them, some eerie anticipation of the green light of the Mark that would be coming above them. There was no way for Draco to warn them without making himself look guilty. He'd have to perform shock as if his life depended on it. No more way to warn them than there would have been to stop this pointless display from happening at all. Not that it would have been worth the risk even if it had seemed a possibility- only a few Muggles, levitated and not even killed, and some bad press for Britain and Fudge, which would do well to distract him from the small matter of a pocket watch...

Soon Mr. Weasley called them in for a celebratory cup of hot cocoa, in which Fred and George showed off all the Galleons they'd won. Draco showed off his new watch with as much faux-smugness as he could muster. "It's thanks to you two," Draco said modestly, grateful for the twins' prediction skills, to save him from any remote suspicion of foreknowledge. "I followed your lead."

"You took his *watch*," Mr. Weasley marveled, "And your father repays you by letting you spend the night in our tent?"

"That's exactly why," Draco lied, go big or go home with lies now. "He was so angry he told me not to come home with them tonight, and go off and stay with my disgusting pauper friends if I wanted to impress them so much. As if that's a *punishment*."

Ron did his best squeaky impression of Dobby. "'Lucius Malfoy is terrible at punishments!'"

Hermione exchanged a bemused look with Ginny, as Potter, Draco, and Luna howled with laughter. "Is this how it feels to never know what their jokes are about?"

"It's awful, isn't it," Ginny sighed. "And Ron and Draco are always joking."

"Yeah," Draco said, "Ron *is* a joke. But for me, maybe it's because I'm *the Joker*," and when he grabbed the corners of his mouth and pulled them very wide apart, he gave Hermione the pleasure then of being the only one to laugh. They'd watched the Muggle Batman movie together this July in her hotel room. He thought he was remembering correctly as he quipped, "Look, I've even got green hair."

"Oh my God," Hermione said, "You *do* look like him. That's actually rather your *personality*," and Luna poked her arm patiently awaiting explanation.

"Why... so... *serious*?" Draco growled at Hermione, twisting his head predatorily in her direction and letting his antics distract him from what he knew was coming. Both she and Potter laughed hysterically this time.

"What's so funny?" Ron asked. Potter's Muggles never took him to movies, so he looked just as clueless, and yet he'd laughed. "You don't get it, do you? Why are *you* laughing?"

Potter flushed, looking down. "He did a funny voice."

Ginny was soon falling asleep over her cocoa, and Mr. Weasley sent them off to bed. Although Draco offered to double up in a bunk with Charlie, he earned only glares for this suggestion, and a swift conjuring of another cot beside the bunks. "Spoilsports," Draco drawled, while focusing very hard on the tent wall in front of him, to avoid the temptation to turn and watch Potter changing behind him.

Draco insisted Luna spend the night as well, and helped her enchant a note to send off to her father, who seemed lackadaisical about such matters. Mr. Weasley conjured her a cot beside Draco, and Draco was unashamed to summon over her trunk from the Lovegood tent, and accept a loan of one of her pajama sets, since she'd brought a week's worth.

"Draco," Potter said slowly, "Those are girl's pajamas." When Draco emerged from the en suite bathroom undeterred in Luna's largest set of pajamas, oversized enough to fit him, Potter nearly fell off his top bunk at the sight.

"What?" said Draco, while Hermione issued commands not to be so *heteronormative*, and Ron laughed his head off at Draco's new silver-patterned pair of metallic pink satin pajamas. "I could be on a runway in Paris. I could be on a runway on the *moon.* Put together with my hair, the ensemble has a real futuristic meets retro-androgynous *je ne sais quoi*-"

"Draco," Hermione said tiredly, "You look very nice. Now why don't we all agree Draco looks very nice so we can get some sleep."

Luna insisted on taking pictures of herself and her favorite cousin in matching pajamas, but then reluctantly agreed to go to bed, still whispering over every now and then to Draco until they finally all fell asleep. Except for Draco, who had taken his time getting dressed, not just

arranging the pajamas but making sure to fill the pockets, with the talon wand, enough Galleons to get by in a pinch, Potter's damaged hair clasp, and his hard-earned new pocket watch.

When Draco heard the first sounds of disruption outside, he kept his eyes closed and his frame as still as possible, but he reached blind into his pocket, felt around, and got out the clasp to try and fasten his hair back on the pillow. Screams began, and Draco was still fumbling when Mr. Weasley cried out and woke the other children.

"Get up! Ron- Harry- come on now, get up, this is urgent!"

Draco was hustled out along with the others, without time to get dressed, though that did lend more credence to his picture as hapless victim. He only managed to get Luna to put back on her Sleeping Beauty necklace before they were pulling on only their shoes and racing out.

It was more dangerous-looking here in the thick of it than it had been from his old vantage point, watching superiorly from the woods. *There's Father*, Draco thought, and made a game of trying to pick out which of the lot of hooded Death Eaters was Father, as they made their green-lit procession levitating a Muggle family above them. Draco finally recognized Father by the spell he used to blast a tent out of the way of their progression: Lacarnum inflamari. Apparently witnessing Draco use it in his assessment had given him some ideas. After the fireball flew through not just that tent but the several beside it, Draco could look back and recognize his father's walk. He wondered what Father would do if he saw him, a beacon in pale metallic pink, his arms around Luna the shorter, longer-haired twin beacon. He wondered what Father would do if Draco raced in front of that motley crew and demanded they stop this farce.

There were two children being whirled about, a Muggle woman with her knickers exposed as she was turned upside-down. When Draco remembered his own reaction the first time, gleefully bragging to Potter about the prospect of the same exposure happening to Hermione, he felt ill. He tightened his arms around Luna, but she wasn't the one in danger.

"Hermione!" he snapped, looking about and drawing her right beside him as well. "Stay by me. Don't you dare wander away, not for a second." Draco might have made her a more appealing target this time for his father, by their friendship. Luna was in shorts, but Hermione as well as Ginny were in nightdresses, and it was sick and filthy that he even had to notice that and fear for them. Sooner than let Father humiliate Hermione like that woman, he would cast Lacarnum inflamari at Father himself, and see how well that fit with Peter's compunctions over underage wizardry.

There had been supposed to be girls' and boys' tents, but Draco's insertion as well as Luna's in their midst had made separation break down. Now there was only one for older and younger, with Bill, Charlie, and Peter coming out of the other tent fully dressed, wands out. Draco had his fingers on his wand in his pocket, and thought sourly that he would have been more use fighting than those three put together, before remembering he had no intention of fighting his father.

"We're going to help the Ministry," Mr. Weasley shouted, readying himself for action. "You lot- get into the woods, and stick together. I'll come and fetch you when we've sorted this

out!"

"Don't worry!" Draco called after him. "No one is going to touch them!" There must have been some excessive vehemence in his voice, because all four men turned to stare back at him, before nodding and racing towards the chaos.

The Weasley twins pulled them towards the wood, and underage statutes or not, Draco dearly hoped they and the others had their wands on them as well. There were no lanterns in the woods, and when Hermione got sick of them blundering around in the darkness, she cast Lumos. Draco followed suit, and they found Ron fallen over a tree-root. The déjà vu hit him in this place of new wariness, afraid not for himself but for them. It hardly helped matters that he was not fully dressed and prepared this time, but running about in pink satin pajamas. While the twins hauled Ron up, Draco took the pause to get his hair out of his eyes, making a useless attempt to fix it with one hand while keeping his lit wand raised for the others.

"Let me," Potter's voice said out of nowhere, and Draco let go and obediently surrendered his hair to Potter, holding the wand higher so it would give him a halo for Potter to work under. "Your hair smells like mint," he said softly, "Must be the coloring." Potter's fingers glided over his scalp, gathering the hairs and sweeping them together under the clasp for him, before putting it in place. Potter's hands brushed the back of his neck as he let it go, and then he turned to face Potter from very close, seeing a lack of awareness of their danger on Potter's face, nothing but concentration on Draco before him...

The trees kept lighting up with blasts of green light in the distance, but a blast that came from closer had Potter urging them on deeper into the wood, to the sound of screaming. For once, Draco's voice was not one crying out. He pushed Potter out of the way, mean as it was, in his haste to get between Hermione and Luna again. They'd lost Fred and George along with Ginny, who'd had the good sense not to stop and dawdle with their little sister in danger. Ron and Harry took up the front, while Draco kept Hermione between the three of them despite her protests. "Hermione, don't you get it? You're not a Muggle, but you're still the first one they'd be after," he hissed, and she made a noise like she hadn't realized and let him hover closer as they walked.

They came upon some Beauxbatons girls arguing nearby. A curly-haired girl asked them, "Où est Madame Maxime? Nous l'avons perdue," and unlike the other four, Draco happened to both speak French and know who Madame Maxime was. Rather careless for them to have lost someone that much taller than Hagrid.

"Je nais sais pas," Draco answered, while the others anxiously waited for him. "Êtes-vous tous sangs-purs?" They all nodded anxiously. "Parents moldus?" They shook their heads. "Pas besoin de s'inquiéter de quoi que ce soit. Personee ne ciblera les sangs-purs. Ne vous inquiétez. Restez-vous hors de vue et vous la trouverez plus tarde. D'accord?"

"What was that?" Hermione asked, looking impressed. "I didn't know you speak French."

Luna lit her wand like Hermione, and Ron followed suit. "They all seemed much calmer after you talked to them. Even with those pajamas."

"I *told* you they're the height of fashion in *Paree*-"

"Ah, no, I don't believe it... I've lost my wand!" Potter exclaimed, drawing all their attention.

"You're kidding?" Ron exclaimed, and they all raised their wands for Potter to look over the ground, but in vain.

"Maybe it's back in the tent," said Ron.

"Maybe it fell out of your pocket when we were running?" Hermione suggested anxiously.

"Maybe one of the French girls took it," Luna suggested, and earned a number of stares. "It's possible," she said placidly.

Draco smirked at Potter's disquiet, nudging at him with his shoulder. Potter jumped, and then jumped again when there was a loud bang. "Don't worry, Potter, if they come for you, I'll shoot fireballs at them," Draco whispered, putting on a brave face, and wiggled his eyebrows at him.

"Let's just keep moving, shall we?" Ron said nervously, and kept them looking for the twins and Ginny. If it was just Ginny, Draco might have said good riddance. And after that trick with the fake Marauder's Map that the twins played on him last year, Draco was ready to surrender them too to the sweet embrace of death even if they had gotten rather fit. But he knew this lot well enough to know that suggestion wouldn't play. He kept his mouth shut, scanning the area for threats around, and waiting for the Dark Mark to erupt above that should be the end to all this useless chaos.

They passed by all sorts of people and species, having to drag Ron back from Veelas. Draco found that rich when there were much lovelier ladies there, his cousin and best friend, in need of Gryffindor chivalry. Once they escaped the Veela, they found themselves in a quiet part of the woods. Potter demonstrated his excellent survival instincts by proclaiming they could just stay here, because, "We'll hear anyone coming a mile off," barely seconds before Bagman came wandering into their hiding place. He questioned them incoherently before leaving them alone.

Ron led them into a small clearing, and kept them all amused by showing off the bow-legged walk of his Krum figurine. Draco contributed to morale by using Engorgio and making the Krum figurine the size of a large book. He enchanted it to try and kiss Hermione, who was distracted enough trying to dodge Little Krum's affections and suppress her shrieks, she almost forgot to fret after the other Weasleys.

"Oh, Hermione, if you don't want him, I'll kiss him," Luna said happily, and was more than generous in the embrace she offered Little Krum, once Draco turned him to her instead. Draco and Ron began to make up a play, where Luna voiced by Draco and a surly Hermione voiced by Ron competed for Krum's affections. Krum was just about coming round to choosing Hermione, before there was another sound of an intruder coming upon them, ruining Draco's planned punchline.

The person staggered up and then halted. "Hello?" called Potter, and Draco whacked him on the arm and put a finger to his lips. One by one, they stifled the light from their wands, and put Little Krum back to small size in Ron's pocket.

Potter would not stay put as Draco advised, and went off to peer around the trees, though at least he had the grace not to run his mouth again. It didn't matter, as a low ragged voice shouted out, "MORSMODRE!"

"Oh, fuck," Draco groaned, and grabbed Potter and pulled him back into their clearing. "Well, at least that should mean it's over," he muttered to himself, but they were all too frozen in perplexed terror to notice him yawn in relief. He avoided watching the green light rise to the sky, having no interest in getting his friends in trouble by some humiliating respiratory fit. But it was hard when everyone else got up and he had to follow to be sociable.

"Draco, what's that?" Luna asked, poking at his arm, and then her face changed when the skull took shape enough to be recognized. She hid her face in his shoulder then, before the snake even licked its way out of the skull, looking happy as ever to be consumed.

Hermione screamed, as did Ron, with Luna's scream muffled by his shoulder. Potter just stared up at the sky blankly. "Why's everyone screaming?" he asked, as the whole damn woods echoed with it, and began to look about for the Mark's caster, surpassing blunderbus that he was. Draco seized his face and jabbed his left index into Potter's scar. "Ow!"

"Isn't that *hurting*, Potter?" Draco hissed. "What use is that ugly thing if it isn't *now*?"

"Harry, come on, move!" Hermione said, and tugged Potter by the jacket. Draco folded Luna under his arm. She didn't seem to be enjoying this remaining sign of Tom Riddle as much as she had the handsome ghost of the diary. "It's the Dark Mark, Harry! You-Know-Who's sign!"

"Voldemort's-?" Potter began, as if it was imperative, even at this moment, that everyone see he was so *edgy* he said the name. That was all it took to have them caught, almost two dozen wizards with their wands raised right at them, surrounding them like some hit squad.

"DUCK!" Potter yelled, instincts at last serving him well, but his hands only caught Ron and Hermione, with Luna still turning to see who had popped into the clearing. The Gryffindors hit the deck, but Draco had to dive those few feet to Luna-

"STUPEFY!" yelled all the adults' voices, and there wasn't time to get Luna to the ground-

"PROTEGO HORRIBILIS!" Draco yelled, pouring every fiber of magic in his body into the talon wand, and impossibly, the shield flew up just in time and held. "Fumos duo!" Draco yelled, and dark red smoke filled the night air as he and Luna hit the grass, where the Gryffindors were coughing from the smoke. The shield collapsed in a second under the weight of all that red light, but it didn't matter in the smoke, as the next Stunning spells whizzed in the air above them.

It felt like Draco had been run over by the Hogwarts Express, but he grappled with his own blindness to grab hold of all four of them, though he couldn't be sure whose limbs were whose. If he could Apparate them all out- but he didn't know if he could Side-Along so many- just Hermione the Muggleborn, he just had to get Hermione out, but was that wrist hers or Luna's- and spells kept flying overhead and he thought footsteps were getting closer-

"VENTUS TRIA!" he yelled, closing his eyes and forcing the talon wand into the air. The dark red smoke was all caught up into a hurricane that whipped all around them, with the sound of adult wizards crying out and falling, trees whipping, one falling with a crash. Draco thought he had Hermione and finally he could-

"Stop!" yelled a very un-Slytherin voice. "STOP! That's my son inside all that smoke!"

"Mr. Weasley?" Draco tried to yell, but he found he could barely hear himself over the wind. And then he caught sight of the man trying to fight his way through the blast. "Meteolojinx recanto!" Draco called, and the whipping force over Ron's father dissipated, leaving five prone teenagers on the dirty ground, with Mr. Weasley rushing up with a face like death.

"Ron, are you alright?" Mr. Weasley called shakily, offering a hand up to his son.

"Out of the way, Arthur," said the icy voice of Crouch, who was leading a group of windswept-looking Ministry wizards towards them. His face was contorted in irrational fury, and it inevitably fastened on Draco as anyone with sense would have known it would. Even if Draco hadn't been the only one with his wand out, it would have. "It seems I don't need to ask," he snapped, "Which of you conjured the Dark Mark!"

Worry about your son, you gormless maggot. He's probably off at large already just foaming at the mouth to turn me into a ferret.

It took a moment before the implication hit, and then Potter and Hermione were yelling out denials that drowned out each other's. Luna's face was still buried in her arms, and Ron was looking around with dull wonder. "Bloody hell, Draco," he breathed. "What'd you do to the *trees*?"

Draco would, he had to concede, have looked less guilty if he had not just leveled half a forest. His whole body felt loose and numb with the energy he'd consumed, fizzing at his fingertips and toes, limbs like long spongy weights. "We didn't cast the Mark!" Draco called weakly, "We saw someone else do it, but not who, and he's gone," and wow, didn't that sound convincing.

"Yeah, we didn't do anything!" said Ron, looking indignantly at his father. "What did you want to attack us for? Draco was just protecting us with that- er- hurricane smoke thing..."

"Do not lie, sir!" shouted Crouch. "You have been discovered at the scene of the crime! Hand over the criminal in your midst!"

Luna poked her head up from her arm cocoon. "Oh no, they don't mean *Draco*, do they? It wasn't Draco!" she called loudly. "There was a strange man, we all saw! Draco was right here with us, he didn't! He was busy making Viktor Krum kiss me!"

Draco feared Luna's remarks had not exactly helped his cause.

"Barty," whispered a nearby witch, "They're kids, Barty, they'd never have been able to-"

"Did you see what those *kids* just did?"

"Where did the Mark come from, you all?" said Mr. Weasley quickly, though even he seemed to be looking in Draco's direction doubtfully. Always in the wrong place at the wrong time. Taught Draco to try and protect Harry Potter.

"Over there," said Hermione shakily, pointing at the place where they had heard the voice, "There was someone behind the trees... they shouted words- an incantation-"

"Oh, stood over there, did they?" said Mr. Crouch, turning his popping eyes on Hermione now, disbelief etched all over his face. "Said an incantation, did they? You seem very well informed about how that Mark is summoned, missy- watched your little Death Eater friend do it, did you?"

Draco should have shut his mouth, he couldn't help it. "Don't call her missy, you chauvinist! And- and don't call me a Death Eater! I'm not!"

"We'll see about that," said Crouch, and gave a brief baffled glance at the pink pajamas before forcibly rolling Draco's sleeves up, which thankfully showed his arms as both pale and clear.

"Unhand the boy, Crouch!" Mr. Weasley yelled, getting between them. "Whatever else he may be, he is a child of fourteen! My son's *schoolmate*!"

"*Lucius Malfoy's* son," Crouch said with loathing. "We'll *see* what he is. Your wand, boy!"

Draco handed over the talon wand, pretending not to be reluctant. Crouch cast Priori Incantato on it, only to snort when a large gust of thick gray smoke in a winding spiral erupted from Draco's wand. "Right. How could I forget what you did to the trees?"

Meanwhile, other wizards had the sense to look in the direction of the stranger, lamenting it was too late. "I don't think so," said a bearded man. "Our Stunners went right through those trees... there's a good chance we got them... and if we didn't, the Malfoy boy must have..."

"Amos, be careful!" said a few of the wizards warningly, as the man squared his shoulders, raised his wand, marched across the clearing and disappeared into the darkness. He had to push aside more than a few upended branches and trees to make it through. Draco had a flash of memory of this stumbling man holding his dead son in his arms. Oh, yeah, that was Cedric's dad. But Mr. Diggory found no sneaking Death Eater in the bushes, only a discarded wand. He emerged with it, his hair covered in leaves, while Bagman Apparated in and began to ask late questions.

"Do any of you recognize this wand?" Mr. Diggory demanded, holding it high in the air, where the Dark Mark was considerate enough to illuminate it for them.

"Hey- that's mine!" said Potter, and for a mad moment Draco thought the poor sod was lying to try and keep Draco out of Azkaban.

"Excuse me?" said Mr. Diggory, in what hardly seemed a respectful enough tone to address *the* Harry Potter.

"That's my wand!" said Potter, like a man desperate to deepen his acquaintance with Dementors. "I dropped it!"

"You dropped it?" repeated Mr. Diggory in disbelief. "Is this a confession? You threw it aside after you conjured the Mark?"

"Amos, think who you're talking to!" Mr. Weasley snapped angrily. "Is Harry Potter likely to conjure the Dark Mark? Or lie for any other who did it?"

"Er- of course not," mumbled Mr. Diggory. "Sorry... carried away..."

"I didn't drop it there, anyway," said Potter, and gestured in the direction of that great looming carnivorous skull. "I missed it right after we got into the wood."

"And how long," Mr. Diggory said, joining Crouch in staring down Draco, "Have you been with Mr. Malfoy tonight?"

"All night," Potter said guilelessly, and now he *was* trying to get Draco sent to Azkaban.

"Do you think it possible," Crouch breathed, "That one of your friends could have taken it from you, or picked it up without you noticing?"

"There's an easy way to see if it was this wand," Mr. Diggory reminded them, and Draco couldn't help but flinch and turn away when Mr. Diggory cast Priori Incantato on Potter's wand, and a miniature gray dark mark roared to life, like the skull had dibs on one wand and the snake another. The snake, naturally, seemed to be the one with the strongest preference for Potter's.

"Deletrius!" Mr. Diggory shouted, and the smoky skull vanished in a wisp of smoke.

"Draco Malfoy," Crouch said with a grim but audible satisfaction, "You are under arrest for the unlawful casting of the Morsmordre spell-"

"He didn't do it!" Potter yelled, inserting himself between them with a magnificent fury that was a thing to behold in any circumstances, let alone when Draco felt this weak and drained in mind and body, and very much needed some righteous savior to pick him off the ground and keep him from going down for dark magic he hadn't even performed.

"And for the violation of the Decree for the Reasonable Restriction of Underage Sorcery, in the presence of twenty Ministry witnesses-"

"There's an allowance in the Decree for self-protection, Barty! You know that will never hold up in court!" Mr. Weasley protested, inserting himself as well. "Amos- Amos, no!" Mr. Diggory had cast an invisible binding spell on Draco, and an Anti-Disapparation charm followed. "For Merlin's sake, Amos, he's doesn't know how to Apparate, he's *fourteen*!" Draco nodded in hasty agreement, only for the silence to be broken by Luna's plaintive voice inserting itself, saying,

"If you're going to be arresting my cousin, I'd like for you to arrest me as well, please."

No one in the clearing, including Draco, knew what to make of that offer. "What is this, girl? Are you confessing that *you* conjured the Mark?" Crouch barked.

"No, I didn't," Luna said, blinking guilelessly, "But Draco didn't either, we all saw him not do it, didn't we?" The five of them nodded together, Ron waving his arms in enthusiastic agreement. "So I might as well be arrested with him, since he's no more guilty than I am. And he *is* wearing my pajamas, I had hoped to get them back at some point, they're my second-favorite..."

"This is so ridiculous!" Hermione took up the theme. "He did nothing except try to defend us! You all just Apparated in and shot spells at us! He couldn't see you weren't Death Eaters! We all vouch for him, it wasn't his wand to do it, and just because he's a Malfoy, that doesn't mean-"

"Exactly," Draco said, leaning on Potter, which allowed him even in his bonds to draw his weary body up to full height. "If we were all judged by the deeds of our family members, where would that leave us, *Mr. Crouch*?" Draco's attempt at subtlety was ruined by himself, when he got blank looks from the other students, and couldn't resist adding, "You see, his son's a Death Eater-"

The minute Crouch lunged at him, snarling with his teeth out, Draco knew he had won.

"Admit it," Draco said. "You're just arresting me to try and get the Minister his watch back."

"You know," Draco said some time after, when the wizards were done taking all their reports and Mr. Diggory was unbinding him from the arrest spells, "Your hostility was uncalled for. I'll have you know I've been a quite enthusiastic supporter of your lovely son at Quidditch."

"Oh, my son is a brilliant Seeker, isn't he?" Mr. Diggory enthused, before his gaze darkened. "And you beat him last year, didn't you?"

"Oh, if that's an arrestable offense, wiping the floor with the official's son's sorry arse at Quidditch," Draco drawled, loud enough for every wizard there to hear, "By all means, arrest me."

"I beat Cedric at Quidditch as well," Potter offered helpfully.

"Are we done wasting our time terrorizing schoolchildren, Barty?" Mr. Weasley asked wearily, while several wizards around burst into helpless laughter, quickly suppressed when Crouch glared in their direction.

"Schoolchildren," Crouch echoed, sweeping his arm around the clearing and gesturing to all of the spell damage to the trees. "Yes, this is clearly the work of mere *schoolchildren.* Take our eyes off this *fourteen-year-old*, and we may have another Dark Lord rising on our hands."

"Thank you!" Draco called, and earned a whack from an exhausted, relieved Hermione as Crouch glowered at him and turned on his heel. He kept up his smirk, before collapsing

against her and sighing, "It really *is* flattering he thinks I could be the next great Dark Lord..."

"It's not like winning a *pageant*, Draco," Hermione said crossly.

Draco hugged Luna closer too, while Mr. Weasley saw off the rest of their company. "Thank you, Luna," Draco mumbled. "You're the best cousin in the entire world. You're lucky we didn't both get arrested. Pink pajamas and all."

Luna looked down at her dirt and leaf-strewn legs, and shrugged. "I'm sure my favorite cousin will buy me new ones."

"I will, I will, you're the best, I love you, thank you," Draco groaned, and enfolded Hermione and Luna tighter in his jelly-like arms.

There was a clearing of a deeper throat nearby. "I, er, I wasn't going to let them arrest you either," Potter said awkwardly.

Draco was too tired to properly roll his eyes in Severus's manner, so he just stuck his tongue out. "Oh, so brave and handsome. You're my *hero*, Harry. How might I ever repay you?"

Not just Potter but all the students reacted, even a returning Mr. Weasley. "What?" Draco said, flushing, "I was joking," and Potter smiled too brightly for such a dark night.

"You called me *Harry*," Potter said, in a voice like this was far more astonishing than Draco attacking twenty ministry wizards with a tornado made of burgundy smoke. Draco's soul could have been sucked out of him by sheer mortification before any Dementors could have come close enough.

"And it will never happen again," Draco said loftily, before turning to Ron for a distraction. "What about you, Ron? Any accolades to claim from my defense? What was your contribution?"

"Erm..." Ron considered, and then reached into his pocket and pulled out his prized new figure. "I protected Victor Krum!"

The Durmstrang Headmaster

Chapter Notes

Playlist

There surely had been worse moments in Lucius Malfoy's life than having to admit Arthur Weasley into Malfoy Manor in the early morning by Floo, bringing his only son and heir covered in mud that failed to hide the pink satin of his pajamas. But Draco doubted it would be judicious to remind Father of any in front of Mr. Weasley.

Mother was not slow in coming, seizing Draco and pulling him protectively close despite his filthy state. Draco's jellied muscles made it all too tempting to sink into his mother's shoulder and the attraction of oblivion, even as Father began to snarl at Mr. Weasley as if he had been the one to personally put Draco in this state.

Draco had to rouse himself eventually to provide agreement to Mr. Weasley's rendition of events. "I know I agreed to come right back home with you," Draco lied, having no interest in giving Mr. Weasley suspicion towards his father to complicate matters. "But I'd cast a tracking charm on my cousin Luna, and I remembered just as we were going to Apparate... I didn't *mean* to break our deal, Father, but I couldn't just go home and leave a charm like that on her pulling at us for a week until we saw each other at Hogwarts. So I had to go back and find her to take it off, so by then it was too late, and I thought I might as well stay with Weasleys, and come back in the morning, and then we were woken up at night and everything was on fire..."

"Your mother and I," Father said tightly, "Were besides ourselves with worry here at home."

It seemed Father at least appreciated Draco's commitment to the pretense, that he had sent both his mother *and* father off to Apparate away before the macabre little attack, and Father could have had no part in it. "I would have been safe if those people in hooded robes hadn't turned up. I went with everyone to hide in the forest, but we ran into someone casting the Dark Mark..."

"*Someone*?" Father asked sharply, and Draco was glad at that moment he hadn't seen who, and given himself a choice between betraying Father and Mr. Weasley, which he was hardly cogent enough at the moment to face.

"None of us saw who," Draco explained, "But it turned out they'd used Potter's wand..."

Mr. Weasley took up the story then, and by the time they were done, Draco found he had somehow fallen asleep standing up against Mother's shoulder. At the very least, the two men had not come to blows. When Draco woke up enough to corroborate Mr. Weasley's account,

of intervening to prevent Draco's arrest from being executed, Father was even forced to grudgingly thank him. Mr. Weasley looked at Draco directly and asked if he was going to be alright, in a way that made it unmistakable he didn't just mean from the night's events, but at being left with his father. Draco nodded and let him Floo out.

He had never thought he would end up in the cellars like this again, stripped to the waist on his knees with his father's walking stick battering his back, not even bothering with stinging jinxes and going straight to venting a very personal rage. Draco had thought himself too formidable a wizard to submit to that treatment again. But he couldn't have fought off a first-year in this exhausted state, and the bonus of that was that he kept drifting in and out, never fully registering the punishment.

He gave Mother his wand before letting Father drag him down the stairs, telling her to leave it in his room, to prevent Father snapping it in his fury, accidentally or on purpose. That removed the temptation to retaliate. And he did not. All he did was take it, and then sleep.

When the Assessor warned Draco about the intoxication of fully unleashing his magic, he'd obviously meant it about consequences outside mere exhaustion. But the exhaustion itself, in the days between the Cup and the return to Hogwarts, was enough to make the warning more than apropos. Draco slept through lunch, and found himself unmotivated to drag himself out of bed for supper, even when Mother came to his room personally to take him downstairs. Whatever she saw in her felled son, broken skin prominently on display without even the energy in him to roll over, it made her give permission for him to eat his meal upstairs, summoning elves to bring him food.

He got to witness a truly spectacular screaming match between Mother and Father then, alternating between caressing his wand he now kept exclusively in his pajama bottom's side pocket, and half-heartedly shoving rosemary lamb into his mouth, one of his favorite meals turned tasteless.

Mother won enough to allow Draco to stay in his room for the following days, as he took his physical and magical depletion as the perfect excuse to take to his sickbed. Mother even brought him the letters his friends had sent, in probable defiance of Father's orders. Draco was drowsy enough to pull her into a hug for that, forgetting the distance he purposefully had been putting between them in the red line, and the inevitable pain that put into his back.

Along with eating, Writing became Draco's sole occupation in his narrow number of waking hours. The Vitamix and Pepper-Up potions that Mother gave were of little avail to alleviate his sluggish state, like a bear determined to go into hibernation though it was not yet fall. It couldn't help that although Mother snuck him numbing potions, Father had forbidden healing balms, potions, or spells for his back. He took his bedridden state to work on his notebooks, but first he had to send off letters assuring all his friends how fine he was.

He was somewhat more forthcoming in his more clandestine letter to Sirius and Remus, his second of the summer.

Dear Meatball,

I sadly regret to inform you that misfortune has crossed the path of your favorite nephew. Despite all the good will I should have accumulated from the universe for my selfless work attempting to clear your name, I have also been tainted with the broad brushstroke of false accusations and calumny by that most blundering of institutions, the Ministry of Magic.

I can understand your situation better now, and further offer my forgiveness for the unorthodox manner in which our acquaintance began at Grimmauld Place. If Remus is reading this letter too and you haven't told him about that, just say that when we met, you were talking to yourself or something. It does seem like something you would be doing.

I won't keep you in what I hope is suspense for much longer. I don't know if wherever you two are shacked up, you've gotten word about the World Cup final. Potter might have told you, by the mirror I sacrificed to him, on the altar of a godfather-godson relationship I expect to advance substantially in quality and quantity in light of my noble relinquishment. Before the attack on the tent city by Death Eaters, I had thought the most noteworthy incident would be a small victory of my own. You might be pleased to know that the odious Minister Fudge, who would have had the Dementor's Kiss administered to you should Severus and I not have flown up in the nick of time, has suffered yet another humiliation at the hands of Slytherins. I bet that Ireland would win but Krum would catch the Snitch, and what had we bet on? Our watches. If you would like me to make you a present of the Minister's omnipresent pocket watch, by all means, I will send it. I hope you could appreciate the humor in that, fugitive-from-the-Ministry uncle of mine.

But anyway, what you want to hear, about the Death Eaters. I was spending the night with the Weasleys, and we went into the woods to hide, where we got separated. It was just me, Ron, Potter, Hermione, and Luna, caught by the Ministry near a mysterious man who cast Morsmordre. Potter has surely outlined all this, and maybe he also told you the Ministry officials Apparated in and attempted to stun us without warning. Potter got the Gryffindors down, and I managed to protect me and Luna and raise a smoke wind to give us cover before Mr. Weasley intervened. It also took his intervention to prevent my arrest, as both Barty Crouch Sr. and Amos Diggory were convinced I am quite the young Dark Lord in training. One supposes the former would be quite familiar with that sort of individual. What do you think, Uncle Sirius? How would I fare as the next great Dark Lord?

Anyway, I am suffering from what Mother calls acute magical exhaustion, as a result of my ordeal, as well as physical injuries sustained in the fleeing and fighting. But don't worry too much about me. Diggory got the cuffs and charms on me, but never took me back to the Ministry, and so far word of my supposed role has stayed out of the papers. I am writing if nothing else to personally assure you that I did not summon the Dark Mark. If you or anyone else suspects I Confunded all my friends to lie for me, I can only rejoice to be so overestimated in my powers. I certainly have overestimated them. If you have any advice about recovering from magical exhaustion, send it ex post facto, please, I am miserable.

Sincerely,

At least Mother and Father had managed to keep Draco's arrest out of the papers, though Draco feared the rumor would spread inevitably through Hogwarts, if nothing else through Diggory's pretty little son. Draco's work in his notebooks mainly consisted of half-drugged rambling dialogue to himself, on the subject of how to prevent the Dark Lord from rising again this year, mainly because he would prefer never to experience anything as unpleasant as the night of the World Cup again, in bodily terms. One of the byproducts of that change would be sparing Cedric Diggory's life, preserving a prime genetic specimen for their generation. That had seemed a far more appealing prospect to Draco before meeting Amos Diggory.

That made the small chart Draco made regarding the pros and cons of saving Cedric's life read as follows: *PROS- 1. Less guilt for Potter. 2. He probably doesn't deserve to die. 3. He's really good-looking. CONS- 1. It's changing the blue loop unnecessarily. 2. His dad's a dickhead.*

Try as Draco might, he couldn't come up with another con. He was just left with the understanding, in his own atrophied moral sense, that it was a poor state of affairs for Draco to be in any position to make such charts. It was the same as looking down at all those wizards at the cup final, knowing the changes he had already made in their fates, erasing the successful blue line. He had power, with his position near the center of events, along with a blue loop not too altered past recognition for his memory to help.

And that was the crux of it. Trying to cut off the Dark Lord's plans at the root, and expose 'Moody' as Crouch Jr... or just keep Potter from ever being selected for the tournament? Acting that early would surely make the Dark Lord begin another plot, of which Draco would know nothing. Still, maybe he should have tried to forestall the entire tournament anyway, and truly salted the earth for the old plan. But that ship had sailed, and now Draco was left with a scenario with only a few moving parts in the coming June: a Portkey, Crouch, Potter, Diggory, Wormtail, and Voldemort in a graveyard.

He had failed last year in taking that key Wormtail part out of the equation. Diggory could be removed from that equation, though, and leave it pretty much unchanged, his life or death not counting much in the cosmic scheme of things. But Draco couldn't in good conscience let the remaining five elements collide, nor could he give away his predictive knowledge to anyone, without making himself seem mad or complicit or both.

That was the difficulty with early intervention: Crouch could simply be replaced by Karkaroff in the Dark Lord's plans, or, God forbid, with Severus. For all Draco knew, Karkaroff had helped Crouch the first time, snitch or not. There wasn't much use in getting one Death Eater out of Hogwarts when more remained, and the tournament was still in play to make Potter vulnerable.

But how would *Draco* have gotten the tournament canceled, even if he tried? How would he prevent Potter from being entered into the tournament, without knowing who or how it had been done the first time? Was his best bet just to cut out the Portkey part of that five-part

equation? That had the merit, along with giving almost an entire year for Potter to grow, of being more theoretically doable than dismantling the circumstances that brought Potter to take the Portkey. He would have to be sure it worked, but it seemed less tenuous than trying to ensure Potter wasn't the one to touch the Cup first by performance sabotage. *Draco* was more than fine with Krum or Delacour biting the dust, but that wasn't a foolproof solution. And what could he do to hunt down Wormtail or Voldemort that Aurors and Dumbledore and the Order of the Phoenix weren't doing already?

Hermione or Severus would have had a better plan than *Be damn sure the Portkey won't work in the Third Task.*

Draco went around in his mind over the haze of the following days, ignoring his father's increasing frustration as he showed no sign of leaving his sickbed. His packing for the year was accomplished by a combination of lazy magic and the assistance of Mother and the elves. Numbing potions kept him calmer, but less lucid and no more healed. He was lucky he could do the magic to even summon and levitate items. He'd been so depleted at first, like a pulled muscle that refused to function before it rested. The first two days after the World Cup, he hadn't been able to cast a Lumos and produce anything more than half-hearted sparks.

By the last day before the Hogwarts Express, Draco had at least gotten his bags packed, sent letters to reassure his friends, ordered a lovely pair of replacement pajamas for Luna, kept harm from befalling his all-precious wand, gotten a large supply of numbing potions to bring to Hogwarts, and completed a full list of objectives. He hadn't stuck to all his second year objectives, but he might have if he hadn't lost his mind that one moment in the Gryffindor common room, and run off with Riddle's diary in broad daylight like a common Hufflepuff. He had a bad pattern of resolving not to involve himself, then choosing to at the last minute. He had once again at the World Cup, but that would be his last deviation from carefully-laid plans. He was older and wiser now, and he had an unalterable plan, albeit one that did unfortunately begin with,

1. *Be damn sure the Portkey won't work in the Third Task. PREVENT RISE OF DARK LORD.*
2. *Just in case, make sure Diggory doesn't touch it along with Potter. A. Better safe than sorry, and B. His family doesn't deserve the prize money anyway, his dad's a dickhead.*
3. *Expose fake Moody after he's failed at the Portkey.*
4. *Keep Luna out of trouble.*
5. *Avoid the Yule Ball. Just stay away from it. Nothing good will come of it.*
6. *Don't get turned into a ferret.*
7. *Improve at dueling. Seriously. You suck at it.*
8. *Have an inconspicuous year. Start shedding "young Dark Lord in training" image.*
9. *Keep in contact with Uncle Sirius and make sure he isn't caught or killed.*
10. *Get over obsession with Potter.*

It was lucky his invisible ink worked, because he was still looking over his newly completed list when he had a visitor in his room, one whose shoes allowed him to enter more silently than Mother's clacking designer ones. "Covert enough to hide your writing even in your own room, Draco? My godson truly is a dark wizard to be *feared*."

"Severus!" Draco cried excitedly, shoving his notebook shut and to the side before opening his arms wide, in an anticipation for an embrace that naturally did not come. "Severus, you're here!" Draco stayed sitting with his arms open, while Severus kept eyeing his invitation to a hug like a Hippogriff ready to maul him. Eventually, Draco made a huffy noise and took the hint, flopping back down. "What are you doing here?"

Severus's eyes found the distinct bent shape of the talon wand in Draco's pajama pocket. "Your mother informed me, the morning after the cup final, of your misadventures with the Weasleys. Now, she has written to me that the damage you underwent is more lingering than she would have hoped. I am here to consult as to the pitiful state in which my godson has managed to plunge himself, before he appears to all and sundry on the Hogwarts Express, and besmirches the good name of his godfather by passing out on the train like some common *Potter*."

Which was Severus's way of saying he'd been worried about him. "It's true, I've taken to my sickbed," Draco informed him, and gave an accounting of the events that had so laid him out. Severus looked troubled when Draco explained the spells he had used to protect Luna.

"You should not have been able to block *that* many Stunning charms," Severus said, "Even were you 24 and not 14, and even for a brief period. Hence the profound magical shock your body seems to have been submerged in. The charms you performed after, while impressive in their destructive force, are not outside your usual repertoire? I am so unfortunate a man as to have to postulate thus..." Draco nodded weakly.

"It's true, Severus, I was just using the tornado the way I did at my magical assessment..."

"*Assessment*?" Severus said sharply. "Is this what has given you delusions of grandeur to such ill effect?" When Draco told Severus all about Pammaque Periander and his bird, Severus stalked clean out of the room. His bellow of *Lucius* before the door had even shut showed who Severus meant to take to task for this. Draco could only hope Severus could bully some information about the actual results out of Father, in between raking him over the coals for it.

Draco tried to stay awake for Severus to come back, but with nothing to do, he inevitably drifted back to sleep. He was only woken with the feeling of hands pushing the covers off him. He hissed when they brushed the healing gashes on his back, but they felt long and lined enough to be Severus's, so he didn't resist. He was only disabused of that false security when a voice that was most definitely not Severus's commented in a slightly accented, unctuous nasal tone, "So I see the stories about the cup are true, if that is what you have been punished for."

"What- who are-" Draco jerked back, rolling over to sit up and scoot back in bed, and opened his eyes to see the white hair and goatee of Igor Karkaroff above him. Karkaroff had taken his hands from Draco's back to the wall at his side, and was examining the pictures he had put up.

"Why does this photograph not move?" Karkaroff asked, running his fingers over the image of him and the Grangers at Highbury. Draco didn't know how he could have imagined those

hands were Severus's. Draco had never seen Severus wear a ring in his life save the dragon Ouroboros one, let alone one on every finger like that.

"Don't touch that," Draco said, drawing his knees up protectively to his chest, with the marks on his back smarting as if Karkaroff had struck at them. "What are you doing in my room?"

"Invited to your lovely Manor for supper," Karkaroff sighed, "And yet your father and mother are nowhere to greet me at the Floo. The elves directed me to a Malfoy not presently with company to receive me." He gave a stomach-churning smile at Draco's hunched, barely clothed form in bed. "Rude, is it not? I await your father's apologies. Unless *you* would like to make them."

His gaze went from Draco to the photographs again, which told their own story. There were wizarding photographs of him and Luna at the gala last year, along with older ones of him and his mother, and just one of him, Pansy, Blaise, and Theo at a Quidditch match at 10. But then there were many more unmoving Polaroids of Hermione, Luna, Potter, and various Weasleys, ticket stubs from football matches as well as Quidditch matches, and a large still poster of Ian Wright in his Arsenal kit that Hermione had given him for his fourteenth birthday. "I should introduce myself..."

"I know who you are," Draco said tightly, telling himself not to take too confrontational a tone, but it was impossible. "You tried to hand my godfather over to the Ministry."

Karkaroff must not have expected him to be well-informed, or else he was lamentably unclear on the pseudo-incestuous bonds between former Death Eater families. He just gave Draco a condescending look of bemusement. "I don't know what you are talking about, young Draco. Now make up for your father's rudeness by satisfying my curiosity. Is it true that you cast the Dark Mark, fought off twenty wizards from the Ministry, and yet somehow avoided arrest?"

Draco didn't even know where to begin with that. "Not an ounce of truth. Don't touch that either!" Karkaroff had picked up the nearly finished dragon Ouroboros charm he was making for Hermione's fifteenth birthday, her own request after seeing Severus's ring and getting jealous. Karkaroff seemed as fascinated by the small flares of the spine as she had been, turning it over in his hand. At Draco's bark, though, he put it down. Draco snatched it and shoved it under his pillow.

"You may have heard," Karkaroff began, smiling thinly, "That the Triwizard Tournament is being held this year at Hogwarts. But the tournament is limited only to wizards of age, and you are but fourteen, are you not?" Draco nodded warily. "So you would not be eligible to compete, whatever your skills in... *darker* magic, would you? And you have had no sign that Dumbledore might have an inclination towards... bending the rules?"

For Salazar's sake. Draco had his room invaded and his wounds felt up, because Karkaroff was worried he was competition for Krum in his little *tournament*? Or, if he was in on Crouch's plans, for Potter? "I wouldn't enter even if I could!"

"Then what," Karkaroff said darkly, "Prevented your arrest, Draco? And why is your father currently so *busy*?" Trust a conspiratorial man to always have conspiracy theories.

"Please, Headmaster Karkaroff, ask my father if you're curious- I'm not well, as you can see-"

"'Not well'," Karkaroff echoed. "A poor euphemism for 'beaten'."

"'Euphemism'," Draco echoed acidly, "A big word in your non-native language, Karkaroff. Did you learn that when preparing your defense before the Wizengamot, or *after* you turned in every one of your friends you could to save your own hide?" Draco's venom was a mistake, he knew it even before he let it out. But he had trouble holding his tongue even not scared or in pain, let alone both.

Karkaroff rounded on him, losing any pretense of friendliness. "You think yourself invulnerable, boy? The Malfoy name-"

"The Malfoy name," Draco said tightly, "Is a hindrance to me, not a help. But I wouldn't expect someone of your limited intellect to understand-"

The insult didn't distract Karkaroff from Draco's hand inching towards his wand.

"Expelliarmus!" Karkaroff cast, with a snarl of disdain, "None of that, *blood traitor*," and bent to pick up Draco's wand where it had fallen.

"I really wouldn't do that if I were you," Draco sighed, leaning back in bed. Karkaroff's subsequent howl of pain showed Draco he'd gotten the result he hoped for. Karkaroff dropped the wand with a howl, and soon both his branded left palm and his right hand wielding his wand were at Draco's throat. "Not my fault, I warned you-"

"What did you do to me?" Karkaroff howled, shaking his burning hand in Draco's face. "The Flagrante curse? Undo it! My *hand*-"

"Who would cast Flagrante on their own wand, genius?" Draco mocked, and Karkaroff picked up his walking stick and slammed it across Draco's face so hard he saw stars.

When Draco's face rolled back towards him, blinking blearily, Karkaroff looked angry enough to do just about anything. "Remove the curse, boy! Now! Or I will *hurt* you for it-"

"There's nothing I can do," Draco said tiredly, "Seriously, ask my mother-"

"Cruc-"

"EXPELLIARMUS!"

The door was kicked open, and Karkaroff's wand sailed into Severus's hand. A wave of Severus's wand, and Karkaroff sailed into the wall, knocking several objects off Draco's bureau with the force of the impact. "Locomotor mortis!" Severus cast, and then "Manibipiscatus!" Karkaroff screamed as his wrists flew over his head, bound there by invisible manacles.

A moment later, Father and Mother came running in. "Severus!" Mother cried, and Father held a hand up in the air to keep her back.

"Why," Severus said, with his voice showing a struggle not to hex each and every person in the room, perhaps even Draco, "Is the *Durmstrang headmaster* in my godson's *bedroom*, preparing to use the *Cruciatus curse* on him?"

Father turned irately towards Mother of all people. "If you had not sent for Severus at the worst possible time-"

"Cruciatus?" Mother asked, stepping up to Karkaroff and drawing her own wand.

"Look what he did to me, woman!" Karkaroff snarled, head jerking towards his palms exposed, back of his hands flattened to wall by Severus's spell. Narcissa stared at the brand, then held up her own palm to Karkaroff, showing her nearly identical burn.

It was annoying in a way. It had been kind of special for only Mother and Uncle Sirius to bear the mark of the talon wand.

"His wand," Mother said tightly, "Responds angrily when someone attempts to part it from its owner. Would you care to explain, Igor, why you were trying to take my son's wand from him?"

It all fell out then, all four adults screaming at each other, including the one still magically pinned to a wall. Draco took the chance to inch out of bed to the floor and recover his wand, which proved perfectly cool and content to let him pick it back up. Draco leaned his head against the wall, happy it was not a wall he shared with Karkaroff, and felt secure beyond any doubt that with Severus here, no one was going to be torturing him now. He and the wand seemed to comfort each other.

He must have fallen asleep, because he had to be shaken awake by Severus, asking him if he had packed. By then, Karkaroff was nowhere in sight. On the way down the stairs after he got dressed, Severus explained that Father had taken Karkaroff away, but had still agreed upon Mother's insistence to let Draco return to Hogwarts that night.

"It will be a walk from Hogsmeade," Severus said icily, "But I have told them the magic of Hogwarts will help begin the real replenishment of your magical resources, with the help of potions and resources I only have there. And *my* use of potions will not be curtailed by your father."

Draco dreamily followed Severus through the Floo with his bags, given energy potions for the walk from Hogsmeade to Hogwarts that propelled him along where mere willpower might have failed. Severus had trouble making Draco understand that he was to stay alone in the Slytherin dorms, rather than in Severus's rooms with him.

Severus took him into the familiar dungeons he had expected to wait one more night to see, bemoaning the clinginess of intolerable godsons, and had to drag Draco back with a long-suffering sigh from the direction of the third-year boys' dorms. He had enough of a battle-ready air that the arrival of another in the common room made him draw his wand and raise it with a whirling snarl.

"Severus," McGonagall said dryly, regarding the wand at her throat with bemusement. "I had hoped you might forgive my intrusion under the circumstances, but if you bear such a strong sentiment against non-Slytherins in your dungeons..."

"Minerva," Severus said, face relaxing, and pocketed his wand without a word, but a slightly mortified air that was more apology than anyone usually got from him. "I take it the headmaster received my message regarding the situation."

"And I see you did not exaggerate," McGonagall said, and looked Draco over with less wariness and more compassion than he would have expected. Draco stumbled over to one of the sofas in front of the unlit snake fireplace, but not soon enough for McGonagall to miss the sight of his back. A few cuts have must reopened there, to judge by the way her breath hitched and she hissed in through her teeth. The wetness he felt there must not just be sweat, but redness soaked through the cream-colored cashmere, though he was too doped up on numbing potions to tell the difference. "Should Mr. Malfoy not visit with Madam Pomfrey before moving into his new dormitory?"

"Draco," Severus said tightly, "Is suffering from acute magical exhaustion, as well as physical and psychological injury. If Poppy wants to offer assistance with the boy, she can come here to do it herself." McGonagall nodded, and took that as an invitation rather than the dismissal Severus had obviously intended it to be, going off saying she would fetch Madam Pomfrey at once.

Severus led Draco to a green-curtained bed, which at least this early arrival gave him the chance to choose first. He got the one furthest back from the entrance, to the right. Severus lodged his trunk beneath his bed for him and granted him permission to nap. He was awoken by McGonagall and Pomfrey's return. At Severus's urging, Draco did not scruple to describe the circumstances behind his current condition. For once, in his tale of the World Cup and the taking to his sickbed that followed, Draco didn't feel guilt for his conduct, nor did he have to tell many lies, only make omissions.

Although his omission of the identity of the wielder of the walking sticks, to both his back and face, made him fear they would assume his father the culprit in both cases. They looked appalled when they heard he had been forbidden healing potions, as if this proved a terrible legacy of abuse. They both said Severus had done the right thing, bringing him early to the care of Hogwarts.

"The greater difficulty," Severus informed them, "Is the issue of the boy's troubled magic, which I fear is additionally slowing his body's natural healing process. Minerva, I know you are familiar with the situation with Draco's wand, but Poppy..."

"Go ahead," Draco said, waving a hand imperiously, as if it was up to him to grant permission. He let himself drift while Severus explained. Draco dozed, only half-hearing Severus as he updated them about attempts to replace it at Ollivander's, and the burning brand the wand became in hands it viewed as its enemies.

He only opened his eyes when Severus referred to a magical assessment, earlier in the month, as having begun a process of magical depletion. From the description Severus gave, it sounded like Father had been remarkably forthcoming as to Periander's procedure, although

either Father had omitted the Unforgivables or Severus was naturally not admitting them to the others now.

"Apparently my fire magic is the strongest," Draco drawled, "So the next time I try to hold back twenty wizards, maybe I'll just set them on fire."

Severus looked like he would have given Draco a healthy tongue-lashing for that without the women present. Draco told them about the assessment, and complained about his father reading and burning the results letter, while all the while Pomfrey healed his eye, face, and back, and complimented Severus on the use of his melodic spell for the wounds on Draco's back. It finally meant Draco learned the name of that spell, *Vulnera satentur*, though Draco's hints about Severus teaching it to him were met with glares. Severus brought an ample supply of dittany to apply in the week to come, leaving no doubt that even impaired, he expected Draco to be more than capable of making it into a paste by himself.

Draco also got to hear the results of the assessment, once McGonagall and Pomfrey had gone. Pomfrey prescribed a number of potions as well as a week of bed rest, but Draco managed to talk her out of the latter. McGonagall said she would speak to Draco's teachers about not calling on him to do practical spellwork in class for that first week, while Severus prescribed Draco a natural remedy for magical exhaustion: a series of soaks in an herbal mix, an invention of his own called Angel's Immersion, after the Angelica in it. It was half just Angelica, but with elecampane, Griffin claw, Murtlap tentacles, and galanthus nivalis, otherwise known as the common snowdrop.

Severus recited the ingredients, rolling his eyes when Draco sluggishly withdrew his fourth notebook to copy them down, and told Draco he would teach him the preparation once Draco was back on his feet. He was nonplused when Draco kept his notebook out, and confessed his hopes that Severus repeat what he'd heard of Periander's letter for him to copy there as well.

Perhaps it would have been more effective without the visible injuries lessened, but Draco still did his best to look small and pathetic there in his Slytherin-green pajamas. Even though he knew it was a task that grew more difficult for manipulative purposes with each year he got older.

"Please, Severus," Draco said, sticking out his lower lip, "It won't leave my mind, no matter how many calming draughts I take," and Severus groaned and gave in.

"As you like, vain boy," he grumbled, "Just stop *whining*. I recall it from this afternoon. Apparently the four major areas your father wanted examined were your magic's nature, raw strength and power, potential growth in the future, and its relation to your wand. Of the nature, you can perhaps guess. Your core is extremely dark." Draco looked away, and Severus made a disapproving sound. "Write it down, Draco. Do not ask questions if you are not prepared for answers, answers you must have expected."

"Sorry," Draco said, and began again to record everything.

"For a wizard of your overall power, your earth magic is notably weak," Severus went on, "Which indicates paucity of light magic, or magic with creative properties as opposed to

destructive ones. Apparently Periander guessed without needing to be told that you cannot produce a Patronus."

"Professor Lupin once said he didn't think I could learn that," Draco said quietly. "I thought that was why. I was so mad. But I guess he was right."

"In terms of strength, Periander ranked your magic as precocious. He places it at the level of a post-Hogwarts student, but conversely predicts less growth to come than one might expect from a fourth-year. He described it as unusually fully-formed, and attributes your difficulties in its control to the discrepancy between your young body and the power you produce, as well as the willfulness of your wand." He saw the terror in Draco's eyes and held up a hand to forestall it. "Before you panic, you would be pleased to hear he said he detected no lingering allegiance to any former owner, and that your bond tends towards if anything being too *strong*. In his words, he had 'never seen a wand half so in love with its witch or wizard.'"

"Is that why I can't get a new one?" Draco asked, speeding past the question of his magic's *age*. That could come the closest to exposing his true identity as anything ever had, but still with the inability to properly explain it to the one person he *would* have trusted with all his secrets if he only could. "Or why it brands people who hold it, but only ones it seems want to take it away from me?"

"This is not Mr. Periander's specialty," Severus said dryly, "But apparently his bird was sick for days after your appointment, so he has reason to believe in the dark potential of your magic."

"'Potential'," Draco echoed. "So I'm not going to get any better."

"You already have more than enough firepower. Your education now is not a question of building that, but learning how to use it. You must build your repertoire of spells, refine your technique, improve close control of individual spells, speed of casting, and above all your endurance, as recently demonstrated. I do not intend to spend *all* my nights brewing angel's infusion."

"So what's the prognosis?" Draco asked wearily. "I'm stuck with this wand, it won't let me go, it gives me more power than I know what to do with- more than my body can handle- and so you're gonna teach me how to handle it?"

Severus frowned severely. "My job is to teach you *Potions*, Draco. For your education in other magic, you will look to your other teachers. Professor McGonagall, for one, is now familiar with your situation. You seem to have won more of her esteem than one would have expected for a Slytherin, let alone a Malfoy."

Draco smiled weakly. "Because I'm good at Transfiguration. Am I really that bad at creative magic if I can make things like that?" He reached out and poked at Severus's Ouroboros ring, then rummaged in his pocket and found the all-precious matching new charm he'd been spending so many hours making for Hermione's birthday. Severus smiled at the sight.

"Which is why," he intoned, "We will not take this assessor's judgment as *gospel*, Draco. Particularly delivered through the biased messenger of *your father.* Half an hour with you

cannot show any man everything *you* are capable of."

"You're the best godfather ever," Draco said contentedly, and Severus looked between Draco and his pile of green pillows as if mentally plotting out the best way to smother him with them.

"You were about to receive a pass to use the prefect's bathrooms freely," Severus said coolly, "To administer your infusions. But if you persist in *compliments*, boy, that can easily be revoked."

Draco was appropriately unenthusiastic after that, and secured the pass with a promise of the infusion's delivery soon. Severus had one more question, though, before he left Draco wrapped up in his bedcovers to rest. "Your father," Severus said, with a guarded look of pain on his face, "Told me that the Assessor forced you to perform the Killing curse for him, although you were reluctant." Draco nodded, wincing. "And that you were successful in it. You must promise me, Draco, that in whatever situation you find yourself, you will never use that curse again. Even in self-protection, the most desperate circumstances, there are other curses. But Avada Kedavra... promise me those words will never again leave your lips as a spell."

"I promise," Draco said, and Severus watched him warily for a long time after before he left him alone.

Bartemius Crouch Jr.

Chapter Notes

Playlist

It was depressing, the knowledge Draco had the entirety of Hogwarts practically to himself, with the corresponding knowledge he did not have the energy to take advantage of it. He didn't even have the energy to make his planned visit to the kitchens to greet Dobby. Mainly, he slept, ate, and slept again, until Severus came to wake him for the opening feast. Severus quietly informed him on their short walk up that he had been saying Potter's name in his sleep. When Severus looked unimpressed by Draco's lie that it had been a nightmare, Draco happily attributed the rest of the blame to Severus giving him faulty healing potions.

It was a bizarre feeling, taking his seat at the end of the Slytherin table as the sole student already present. He could feel the professors stare down at him from their high table, a green-robed Dumbledore just about the last person he wanted to risk eye contact with. It was ironic, after how much of last year he had spent fantasizing about Lupin's violent demise, how relieved Draco would have been to see him there now.

He thought he would have one friendly face up there in Hagrid, except Hagrid would be ferrying the first-years. So he just let his face rest on the edge of the table, too wiped out inside to even apply the effort to make his head a cushion with his arms. A loud throat-clearing from the high table removed even that comfort, as Draco looked up to see Severus clear it again, giving a look that said, *Whatever has happened to you, however you are feeling, you are my godson, and you will act like it.*

It was storming outside, a gale that Draco hadn't remembered but which his superstitious fourteen-year-old mind had surely taken as an ill omen. The enchanted ceiling showed the whirling dark clouds from outside, but added only the sight and not the sound or feel of their deluge. When the students began to trickle in from the entrance hall, Draco had the satisfaction of observing he was just about the only one who was dry. Luckily, none of Draco's associates were amongst the first to slosh their way in, with no familiar faces in the small cluster of students early enough to see Draco had been already there and not just in the first group. He kept an eye out for Luna and the Gryffindors, and had to hold back a laugh at the ungodly things the rain had done to poor Hermione's hair. Merlin, it was good to see her. It instantly made him feel more himself.

Ron waved enthusiastically when he saw him. That lifted Draco's spirits further, so much that he had to admonish himself against the possibility he had let himself get fond of a Weasley. *Still only my second-favorite Weasley at best,* he reminded himself. Then a drenched Potter had the temerity to look even better wet than dry. He was shivering as he stared over at Draco, returning Draco's wave with a worried look.

Draco didn't understand that sad face until the Slytherin fourth-years joined him, with Theo casting drying spells on each of them with a long-suffering air. Blaise informed him, with many suggestive eyebrow-raises, of Potter's journey back and forth through the compartments searching for Draco. It figured that Potter would be the one to find Draco's absence the most worrisome. Always so protective. It was like he thought that if he didn't spend enough time sheltering Draco, bequeathing his noble influence by osmosis, the insidious Malfoy would start handing out poison apples to local princesses or something.

"We didn't see you either," Vince said suspiciously. "Some people were saying you'd been expelled because you'd cast the Dark-" He caught Draco's gaze and seemed to remember who he was speaking to. "Sorry, Draco! *I* don't think so! None of us do. We just think you ought to know, you know, that people are saying it, in case you want to go and punish them..."

"What are they saying?" Draco asked. Once Potter had settled at the table beside the twins, Draco caught his gaze and stuck his tongue out at him. Potter smiled in response, and it felt like three Pepper-up potions at once, the effect of that gaze on him again.

He says he's bisexual! some inconveniently optimistic voice in his head piped up, the opposite of his internal Severus. This one sounded more like Luna.

"Oh, nothing much," Millie said, "Just that you cast the Dark Mark at the Quidditch World Cup, and that when the Ministry sent wizards to apprehend you, you fought off twenty of them with a tornado made of blood and knocked down half the forest, and still didn't get arrested..."

"That does sound like something Draco would do," Theo said mildly, propping his chin on his hand to stare at Draco.

There were second-years nearby listening with petrified faces, so Draco just rolled his eyes dismissively in response, rather than admit the second part was relatively true. What he needed to avoid was showing any of the weakness he'd been suffering since the Cup. No one would be as quick as his housemates at using it against him, most especially the inimitable Blaise Zabini.

"The Heir of Slytherin strikes again," Draco quipped, and watched Blaise fight back a smile that gave Vince and Greg permission to laugh at what they had all finally learned to take as a joke. Unfortunately, it made the second-years start whispering to each other, *What's the Heir of Slytherin?*

Thankfully for those second-years' peace of mind, the soggy first-years finally made their appearance. Draco had to come face-to-face with his eternal nemesis the Sorting Hat, who had prepared for his big moment this year with another unnecessarily long song. Its narcissistic end in the hat's origin story happened to reveal his original occupation as Gryffindor's hat, which explained so much. It figured he'd wanted to keep all the good ones like Potter for his own side. And Merlin, Draco couldn't let himself get into the habit of staring across the Great Hall at Potter. Potter spent enough time doing the opposite at Draco, it seemed a mathematical inevitability that he would catch Draco at it.

As he did then, as Potter turned his head from the hat to Draco and stared over, with his wet hair sticking in disheveled tendrils to his forehead, that probably showed off his scar if you were close enough. Everyone else was too enthralled by the Sorting to notice, so Draco mimed a hat over at Potter, gesturing over his hair like he was crowning himself. He made it clear which hat he meant by the direction of his gaze, then looked back to Potter and mimed pulling a sword out of the hat, which he then plunged into the back of his appointed Basilisk, Greg, who didn't notice the light tap of the virtual Sword of Gryffindor. By the time Draco had finished slaying the savage beast and cleaning off the sword, Potter had covered his mouth, struggling against laughter so intensive. One had to say Draco had successfully upstaged the entertainment that Draco's nemesis provided, at least to that Boy Who Lived, who the hat had taken from his rightful place in Slytherin.

But Potter was in Gryffindor, which meant a severe whisper from Granger, presumably for not paying proper respectful attention to the Sortings, where Potter's gaze went next. Draco sighed, let his gaze unfocus in the same direction, and mechanically clapped his hands together when he felt the vibration at the table that meant someone had been sorted into Slytherin.

Draco had been looking forward to a good long speech to doze off during, but the eternally inconvenient Dumbledore just said, "I have only two words to say to you. Tuck in."

It had been difficult since the World Cup to get up the energy to eat properly. Draco had ignored Severus's complaints that morning at breakfast, that Draco's energy issue wasn't been helped by Draco not forcing himself to eat more. But when at lunch, Severus had hinted that Draco's eating habits were making him look rather angular and unattractive, Draco had began to eat with gusto. He did so now as well, stuffing his face with roast, which did have the pleasant side effect of making it less expected for him to say things to his fellow Slytherins.

It didn't keep *them* from talking, though, and the summer had made Draco forget quite how annoying most of them were, convinced they knew everything while knowing so very little. Even Theo was little different than the rest in that. When Draco and the fourth-year girls regaled the boys with tales of selling the Quibbler at the tent city, he looked every inch the appalled high-class pureblood he was. "Why, Theo," Draco breathed in a suggestive tone, remembering the crush that the boy had seemed to develop for him in fourth or fifth year. He wondered if his different behavior in the red line had hindered or hurried it along. "What else is it you would prefer I be selling?"

Theo turned beet red. He stammered so incoherently at that, not only all the other fourth-years, but other years took up laughing at the poor tongue-tied Nott. Even when a wide-eyed new first year called Malcolm Baddock asked Theo what was wrong, he could only produce wordless sputtering in response.

It was good to know that in select circumstances, Draco didn't have to even get out his wand to cast Langlock.

Being social and putting on a brave face for his fellow Slytherins was as uniquely exhausting as it had always been. He was grateful when Dumbledore's real speech came. This one dragged on, naturally, when Draco was flagging and fantasizing about going to bed. The storm was still loud, as if to forecast just how terrible Dumbledore's idea to hold the

Triwizard Tournament would turn out to be. Or maybe it wouldn't, if Draco had anything to say about it.

Right now, Draco would be hard-pressed to carry himself back to their new fourth-year dorm without passing out behind some statue or suit of armor on the way down.

"So!" said a beaming Dumbledore. "Now that we are all fed and watered, I must once more ask for your attention, while I give out a few notices. Mr. Filch, the caretaker, has asked me to tell you that the list of objects forbidden inside the castle..."

Draco felt safe tuning the speech out, until everyone reacted in shock to the announcement of Quidditch being canceled. And then there was the thunderstorm-backed dramatic entrance of the artist formerly known as Barty Crouch Jr., Draco's personal least favorite of all their Defense professors, and they'd had some real clunkers in that lot. The tap of his long staff reminded Draco unpleasantly of his father's walking stick this time around, but otherwise, 'Moody' was the exact same unseemly package as ever, as if designed to give the lie to the proposition that the side of light *looked* heroic, and good was beautiful. Well, Draco supposed *someone* had to undo the work Potter was doing on that front. And it did give Crouch a false form that matched the hideousness within.

Draco kept his head down and avoided eye contact. Stopping the Dark Lord was great and all, but if push came to shove, the most important item on this year's agenda might be avoiding being turned into a ferret.

Crouch's introduction as Defense professor got no applause, hilariously enough, as if the students knew what was coming, although rationally, Draco knew it was just that foreboding appearance forestalling it. Draco had to cover his mouth not to laugh, while Theo seemed to have recovered enough from the innuendos to struggle with the same, covering his mouth as well as they smirked at each other. Draco was sure Severus wouldn't be applauding up at the high table either.

At least he didn't have to bother feigning shock at Dumbledore's subsequent announcement that the Triwizard Tournament would be this year. Nor would it be new this time to any Weasleys and co. Sneaking a glance over at the excited Gryffindor faces, he wondered if extra time to concoct tricks to fool the Goblet of Fire might somehow push the Weasley twins over the line and help them con their way in. Granted, it wasn't an honor with the highest life expectancy, but it wasn't like one of them had a much longer one anyway, might as well go for the glory...

When Dumbledore announced the prize money, a lot of Draco's fellow Slytherins started looking enticed as well, though most came from affluent families already. "Can you imagine?" Vince whispered, Vince who had about as much chance of being chosen at any age for the Triwizard Tournament, let alone winning it, as he had of succeeding at a month-long fast.

Draco made a face at Greg and shook his head. "I wouldn't enter even if I could." He rolled his eyes when he heard Theo on his other side whisper,

"But Draco, if you could, you'd probably win."

"And now, it is late," Dumbledore was finishing, "And I know how important it is to you all to be alert and rested as you enter your lessons tomorrow morning. Bedtime! Chop chop!"

Draco wandered off in the manner of a sluggish Inferi with his fellow green dungeon-dwellers, though part of him was disappointed Potter hadn't made an attempt to talk to him, if he'd wanted so badly to on the train. He hadn't been able to spot Luna at Ravenclaw all through the meal despite her bright hair, she was just so small.

But when he yelled "Luna!" across the hall, she jumped up and waved her arms. He took a pink present covered in foil unicorns out of his bag and levitated it over a sea of heads to her arms. It drew the attention of lots of departing students, but he only had eyes for Luna's huge smile, as she ripped it open and found her replacement pink pajamas inside, before a Ravenclaw prefect was hustling her along. No Slytherin prefects had dared try to hustle Draco, for some odd reason.

Then Draco remembered he had to haul arse, to make it back to his new dorm in time to avoid the other boys noticing he'd already claimed a bed. No one really dared stay in his way when he hurried somewhere in the dungeons, so he successfully pretended to have rushed for the best bed, and be royally satisfied with his choice as the other boys arrived. He was surprised to find a flushed-eared Theo willingly taking the bed beside his.

The good thing about having established himself in past years as an antisocial pillock was that no one expected him to chat or do anything but spell his curtains shut and silent, upon which no one could see how speedily he drifted to sleep.

The next morning brought gray weather and a grayer mood, when picking up Draco's new timetable gave him the stark reminder that yes, he would have Defense with Crouch sooner rather than later, a double slot on Wednesdays. He played a stupid game with himself at breakfast of *Who does it make it the hardest to breathe when I look at*, and had to conclude that despite Crouch's foul appearance, personality, and personal standards of hygiene, he still had nothing in that department on Dumbledore, heading into his fourth year as reigning champion. "Draco?" someone was calling. "Draco? Hello? Anyone in there?" It turned out to be Blaise, who wanted to compare timetables.

"Don't mind Draco, he's always in his own world," Pansy said, with enough affection in her voice to worry Draco. Sometimes he thought it would be nice to be able to be friends with Pansy this time around, after she had brought him Pettigrew- *just* friends. But he could never trust any friendliness on his part not to be taken as giving him false hope.

Oh, wow, Draco, he thought with acute self-loathing. *That's so awful for a person, when all they want is to be friends with somebody, and that other person just has terrible obsessive feelings for them that won't go away.*

Speaking of Draco's terrible obsessive feelings, the object of them was staring at him. Sometimes Potter's stare in the Great Hall proved heavy enough for it to seem a physical drag on his back, at which times Draco did show he had noticed and stared back. Potter made a complicated series of gestures which showed his inferior skills at miming to Draco's. Hermione turned and made the more efficient gestures of four fingers and then an L for

library. Draco nodded and turned back to his Slytherins, though a second later he hated himself for agreeing. That library visit was time he could have used for napping.

Draco counted on a peaceful first day of class until having to explain to the Gryffindors his absence on the Hogwarts Express, a hope swiftly disappointed when Blaise got his attention between classes. After they left Ancient Runes together, Draco's somnambulistic trudge was interrupted by Blaise taking him aside in the courtyard to show him an article in the Daily Prophet. "Not trying to start anything," he said hastily after handing it over, "Just thought you'd want to know," and backed away slowly with his hands raised, like expecting to be cursed for lending the newspaper was perfectly reasonable behavior when it came to Draco Malfoy.

Draco understood when he harangued Vince into reading the first few lines aloud for him, and soon wished he hadn't. "'It seems as though the Ministry of Magic's troubles are not yet at an end, writes Rita Skeeter, Special Correspondent'," Vince read. It was a depressing reflection, how much better Blaise's friendship had benefitted Draco's old lackeys. Vince could read aloud much more fluidly than Draco ever remembered in the blue loop. "'Recently under fire for its poor crowd control at the Quidditch World Cup, and still unable to account for the disappearance of one of its witches, the Ministry was plunged into fresh embarrassment yesterday by the antics of Arnold Weasley, of the Misuse of Muggle Artefacts Office'-" Vince stopped, blanching.

"Don't worry, Vince," Pansy said, flopping down beside them. "That must be another Weasley, I don't think there's any called Arnold, is there?"

The fact that Pansy knew that was slightly disturbing. "No, it must be a mistake for Arthur Weasley," Draco sighed, "He works in that office, he's their dad," and reclaimed the paper from Vince. Apparently Mr. Weasley seemed to have gotten into some scrape involving Moody, which really more showed the wisdom of avoiding all contact with that old fossil than anything. There was an unflattering picture included which did little for either of the Weasley parents or the Burrow behind them, well-chosen for a smear piece like this. Draco kept the paper, and showed it to all his fellow Slytherins as a warning to give Moody a wide berth. "He'll hold who our fathers are against us," he told Theo seriously, and Theo was gracious enough to nod without reminding him that Draco had a habit of doing the exact same thing.

Ron looked mortified when Draco brought it to his attention as well at the library that day. He hardly looked reassured by Draco's belief that surely nothing would come of it. "You're just pleased there's no mention of *you* in all this about unrest at the cup final," he said grumpily. "Your father's kept you out of all of it, has he? While my father just gets raked over the coals whenever..."

"Draco is trying to be nice, Ronald," Hermione sighed, "Do be kind and reciprocate," and Potter took the paper and read over the article himself with a frown.

"You know," Draco offered, trying to be helpful, "Mrs. Granger told me once that there's a Muggle saying, 'All publicity is good publicity.'"

Draco had set himself up for it, but at least it made Ron brighten up again, to have the chance to get in a quality jab. "So speaks the Heir of Slytherin," Ron laughed. "'Enemies of the heir, beware' over the walls in rooster blood... that count as good publicity, Frankenstein?"

Draco tilted his chin up haughtily. "The more educated members of society might file that under the category of 'multichannel marketing'."

Potter was relatively quiet, which made it easier to try and ignore him just sitting there with that face, as if it was alright, like Draco didn't already have a hard enough life, without that face to try and fail not to stare at... at least until Ron and Hermione made what was obviously a prearranged early exit. Their vague excuses of Lavender Brown needing a hand with something were barely uttered before Potter took Draco into the Defense stacks. The first flash of his green eyes in the shadow of the tomes above them made Draco remember the way the light had poured out from his wand over the bleeding snake...

"Are you okay? Why weren't you on the Hogwarts Express?" Potter asked without preamble.

Somehow lying to Potter seemed impossible, all the more when Draco was actually grateful to have the stacks behind him and Potter's hands on his shoulders before him, to do most all the work of keeping him standing up. "I've been kind of sick since the cup final, okay? Don't freak out." The loud noise that drew from Potter's mouth showed a complete disregard of Draco's instructions. For once Draco was the one to cover Potter's mouth, instead of the other way around. "Ssh, come on, what did I say? You wanna go for a walk?"

Potter insisted on carrying Draco's bag for him as they left, and refused to give it back for the three flights of stairs they had to climb down to the entrance hall. He led Draco out into the sunlight, and used Draco being liberated of his bag as an excuse to drag him all the way out to the edge of the lake, even on a miserable muddy-skied day. "If we get wet," Draco whined, "You get cursed, no excuses, no exceptions," and Potter took off his robes and sweater and spread them over the ground for Draco before he sat down.

"I'll take that risk. What do you mean, you're sick? You've been acting normally-"

"The operative word," Draco groaned, "Is *acting*," and lay down over Potter's robes, closing his eyes and manfully trying to ignore how much they smelled like him. "If there was to be an intervention, Potter, you lot couldn't have let Hermione perform it?"

"I'm sorry." Potter's voice colored with enough hurt that Draco had to stare up. Potter had sat cross-legged and leaned over Draco to inspect the ailing Slytherin. "Tell me how you're sick."

"And here I thought I'd been liberated from Diggory's bearded louse of a father," Draco drawled. "Rescued and yet I end up under interrogation regardless... okay, okay, fine, it's mostly magical exhaustion, okay? That's a thing, apparently. What I did in that forest was too much for me. But I'm not in any danger, I just need rest. I'm so bloody tired all the time, you have no idea. Going to Hogwarts is pretty much the first time I got out of bed after Mr. Weasley took me home."

"Seriously?" Incredibly, Potter seemed to fear Draco was lying. "Magical exhaustion? *You*?"

"Don't go spreading it around, Potter," Draco sighed, stretching his arms over his head and thanking his lucky stars for Severus and Pomfrey, who'd allowed him to lie down on his back without pain again. "Severus took me early to Hogwarts because of it, okay? That's why I wasn't on the train. There, are you satisfied?"

Potter looked twice as worried as before Draco had answered the question. Draco grabbed him by the tie and hauled him down beside him. Potter let out an indignant squawking noise, arms flailing, so Draco just pulled the tie fully untucked, and tightened his grasp on it until Potter was breathless, staring over with pupils visibly dilating, slow dark orbs expanding in wide lake-green eyes.

"Look, Potter," Draco said, and gave that tie a few more satisfying tugs that didn't quite constrict Potter's airflow, but didn't exactly encourage it either. "Can you deny I am still more than a match for you? And you slayed a Basilisk, I seem to recall, though I think I'll have to ask Cho Chang for the full heroic details-"

"Shut *up*!" Potter yelled, much more carelessly, and began to wrestle with Draco's hands on his tie, until a voice above them barked,

"OH NO YOU DON'T, LADDIE! GET YOUR HANDS OFF HARRY POTTER!"

Draco sprang back, sitting up, and saw Crouch standing over the two of them, looming quite as homicidally as he had in the blue loop, catching Draco trying to curse Potter in the back. "Sir," Potter said, blinking up dazed into the emerging sunlight, "We were just messing around-"

"I don't think so, Malfoy!" Crouch bellowed in that ridiculous Moody impression of his, false blue flashing eerily down at Draco, and drew his wand, gesturing for him to put distance between them, which Draco hastily scooted off to obey. "Don't think I- don't- see- *right*-through you, boy!"

"Hey!" Potter said, leaping up indignantly, inserting his body between Draco and the threat like he always seemed to. "We're friends! We were playing around, Professor- having fun-"

"Oh, you think it's fun and games with his lot," Crouch hissed. "They draw you in, don't they? Charming they can seem, oh yes, but it doesn't end up so fun, does it, little *ferret*?"

Oh, no. Oh, no. Oh, *hell* no. Draco had never been happier to cower behind Potter.

"Leave him alone," Potter said fiercely, "If you're talking about who his father is, he's nothing like him."

"Oh, no," Crouch growled, "I'm talking about who *he* is. You should keep a very close watch on your *friend*, Potter. And believe me, I will do the same. With *both* eyes."

Careful, Barty. Any time I liked, I could drop an anonymous note to Dumbledore for someone to check in on how everyone's favorite Death Eater junior is doing in Azkaban.

Once Crouch stalked away, Potter beckoned him back over protectively. "Everyone judges you before they meet you because of your family, don't they? Even Ron did. Cedric's *dad* did. And now our Defense professor does. I hate it so much! If they *knew* you..."

How ironic to hear such sympathies expressed, towards a boy whose real self had spent years judging everyone *he* met by who their family was, Potter's beloved Weasleys most of all.

"What is it, Potter," Draco drawled, "That could be so vital to know about me to miraculously change their minds? I'm all ears. What great virtue is it to redeem my tainted blood?"

Potter pulled him to sit beside him again, as the sun at last began to set above them on this gloomy day. "Fishing for compliments, Draco?"

"No," Draco said with a complacent smile, "Just wondering what makes someone like you so sure about someone like me."

That put shadows in those lovely eyes. "Why do you say that as if we're so different?"

"I'm just wondering. Was it that I gave you that two-way mirror for your birthday? It *was* a pretty spectacular present..."

"Oh!" Potter exclaimed. "I almost forgot! Your birthday present! I have yours, I'm sorry I didn't send one this summer, but I have one, it should be useful even with no Quidditch..."

When Potter reached into his bag and produced a messily wrapped silver package, Draco knew what it was even before he opened it. What he didn't expect was for it to look so shockingly expensive, a snaking, glittering silver S-like shape, with an elegant emerald curled at its center in the shape of a little evil eye, every jewel looking real. There was a slip like the last clasp telling about the enchantments, but this one was also certified waterproof. And had to have cost a small fortune. Draco opened his mouth to protest that it was too much, before remembering how annoying he found it when others said that to him over gifts. It wasn't like he wasn't rich. He supposed Potter happened to be as well. Potter just never tended to use this money this much.

"S for snake," Draco said softly, captivated despite himself by the elegant beauty of the clasp, "Or S for Slytherin?"

"I don't know," Potter said, looking down shyly. "It just came in all the initials, but I didn't know if you'd like a D or an M or something else, and I thought the shape looked the best-"

"Potter," Draco said, "It's a gift worthy of a Malfoy. And I do not say that lightly."

"Whatever," Potter muttered, though the embarrassed smile he gave his own knees then spoke for itself.

"It goes on the back of my head, though," Draco said, "So you'll have to tell me if it suits me." Draco finger-combed his hair before arranging the loose strands of hair beneath the clasp, and as usual, Potter's hands took over the task. By this point, they'd gotten rather good at it. "Well?" Draco asked once it was in place, and craned his head around one way or

another, showing it off for Potter. He sprawled out on his stomach at last to give Potter a proper view, noting with satisfaction that Potter still hadn't properly put his tie back in place.

The angle shouldn't have let Potter see the clasp, but he still pronounced "Beautiful," before the sun set low enough they had to go inside. "I wish you were a Gryffindor," Potter said, for the umpteenth time, and Draco pointedly turned his head to show off his very Slytherin new clasp.

"But I look so good in green," Draco drawled, and Potter wrung his hands before him, and then whispered before they parted,

"You'd look better in red."

Some things didn't change, no matter how low Draco's energy ebbed. Dobby was still the adversary of his fellow elves, with all his talk of rights and freedom, and a perspective it seemed few of them shared. When Draco sat down the second morning of term with him in the kitchen, and told him the story of growing the roses for Winky, Dobby proclaimed it a noble show of goodness, but the other elves could be heard making dismissive comments, with the brother and sister, Wooky and Nissy, delivering a full disquisition on the subject.

Apparently, Wooky and Nissy did not approve of the part of Draco's account where Winky complained and made a spectacle of herself in the process of obeying her master's instructions. They thought Draco spoiled the elves he came into contact with by coddling them. Thus it was that Draco found himself again making threats towards house elves, albeit subtler ones than in the blue line, about the implications for them, should they be too overtly unkind to Draco's friend Dobby.

Sirius wrote back about magical exhaustion, but neither he or Remus had any more ideas than Severus. He turned down the offer of Fudge's pocket watch, but professed himself very impressed with Draco's betting prowess. The rest of the letter, apart from a few worrisome asides about the difficulty of Remus's most recent transformations, was mere commonplaces, anecdotes about the funny parts of being on the run together with his beloved Remus apart from the werewolf thing. So in all it was a useless letter, but it left Draco feeling very warm.

Longbottom still had more designs on Seamus's life than Draco had ever had. When Draco intervened to prevent Longbottom from melting his third cauldron in Potions, Severus was angry enough at him that he almost withheld the first batch of Angel's Infusion. Not quite, though, once Draco cheerfully reminded Severus of the time he sent Aurors after him, which had to be counted a slightly greater blow to godfather-godson harmony than the transgression of saving a Longbottom.

Draco hoped whatever karma he'd picked up from Longbottom-coddling would carry over to his first Defense class. He took several energy potions, made sure he had all his books and supplies perfectly in order and organized, tied back his hair out of the way with Potter's clasp, and added vials of calming draught and draught of peace before braving the DADA classroom. Draco ended up very early that Wednesday afternoon for Double DADA, flipping aimlessly through his copy of *The Dark Forces: A Guide to Self-Protection*. He could detect a

similar lack of enthusiasm in his fellow Slytherins, for a new professor who in their eyes happened to be a famed Auror too familiar with their parents as well. Really, Dumbledore's Defense hiring policies...

It felt like a nearly sackable offense even without the truth of Crouch's identity known, as Draco had to face up to that ever-wandering solo Cyclops eye, roving into the room like its owner had just received the Dementor's Kiss and didn't quite know how he felt about it yet. The *eye* in Mad-Eye Moody seemed lamentably removable to Draco, as the class began with Crouch telling the students they wouldn't need their books. When Theo persisted in leaving his out, never one quick to put away a book, just in as in the blue loop, Crouch transfigured it into a rather grumpy and foul-smelling iguana.

Draco had thought the famed Auror not a man fond of Slytherins, or at least Slytherins with Death Eater fathers or even ties in their families. Which, at least in the case of the nine fourth-years, meant all of them. Now, Draco knew that it was true, but from the opposite side: Crouch must despise them for their fathers' supposed disloyalty, staying out of prison and forsaking the Dark Lord while he had suffered and remained loyal. Draco remembered it from last time, but it struck him as more pronounced now. Maybe that had to do with the brazen nefarious murder attempt on the Boy Who Lived that Crouch had interrupted on Draco's part, making Draco seem a worse traitor than even his father. Or maybe it was Draco's own exhaustion to fray his nerves too thin.

The way Crouch pronounced each one of their last names, not even bothering to say their first names, showed how little distinction he drew between them and their parents. The swiveling eye seemed to project a different face than the fourteen-year-old ones watching him.

"So," Crouch said finally. "I have had a letter from your last Defense teacher that seems to indicate you are behind on dealing with curses. You are not supposed to see illegal dark curses before sixth-year. But with the families you have, I would not be surprised if more than one of you saw them before first-year. And my job is to make sure all of you lot know how to defend against those illegal curses, not just... cast them." Both his eyes focused on Draco with those last words. "I have Dumbledore's permission to bring you all face-to-face with whatever harsh reality you have not already learned. Now let us see how much you have all already learned. Do any of you know which curses are most heavily punished by wizarding law?"

Draco was not about to be sucked into answering any of these questions. He pitied poor Greg as he raised his hand and tentatively answered, "The Unforgivable curses?" It was so rare Greg actually knew the answer in class, you couldn't begrudge him leaping at the opportunity.

When Moody asked him to name one, Greg said, "The Imperius curse," and Moody barked out a laugh.

"A favorite of many!" Moody said with bitterness. "Gave the Ministry a lot of trouble at one time, the Imperius curse." He got out the glass jar that Draco remembered all too well. In the blue loop, Draco had often thought back to this lesson when forced to use the Imperius or Cruciatus curse on someone, picturing them as the cave spiders instead of actual people, when his squeamishness was overwhelming. So if Crouch thought he could intimidate Draco

with them, he would be disappointed. Draco regularly practiced such experiments on the Manor's cellar spiders.

One for each curse, Crouch's spiders. Draco might have known that Crouch had some Death Eater ties, with the choice of conjured cave spiders, Aunt Bella's favorite subject for practices.

Draco idly wondered whether, if they could talk to them, and the spiders could be told what each curse was, which preference they would have as to which to receive. It seemed likely to be mind control to torture to killing in order of preference, though after long enough under the Cruciatus, more than a few spiders might change their opinion.

Crouch caught one of the spiders, lifted it for them, and cast "Imperio!" The spider performed the bizarre dance already burned into Draco's memory, a dance that had fascinated as much as repelled him the first time around. He remembered idly fantasizing about using the Imperius after that first lesson on Potter, to make him dance, embarrass him- or even do other things, though the ideas had remained vague and unformed in his fourteen-year-old mind. He could only be glad that there were certain depths of evil his self in the blue loop had never sunken to.

Draco couldn't make himself laugh at the tap dance. There wasn't even the reflexive surprise laughter. He feared he must look bored with his perpetual tiredness these days, suppressing a yawn more than anything, as the other Slytherins laughed at the spectacle. Moody didn't seem to like the laughs, and put a stop to their merriment. "Not so funny, is it?" he said, and leaped on the other Slytherin who hadn't been laughing. "Nott! Why isn't it funny?"

"Because you could make it do *anything*," Theo said quietly. "Hurt others, or itself."

"Yes. I could make it drown itself. And many have claimed to be controlled by the Imperius curse, and forced to do terrible things," said Crouch. He didn't bother to hide how his eyes focused on Draco for that reference. *Oh, Father, you have rather poisoned the well for me here.* "It was very difficult for the Ministry to separate those who had really been cursed, and those who were looking for a quick way out from the payment for their sins. Whatever these men who claimed to have collapsed under the Imperius curse, whatever else, they were *weak.*" *No argument from me about Father on that front.*

The sound of Crouch's voice was unsteady, as if reeling between sticking to a script and giving in to aggression at the sight of his old comrades' children. "Because the Imperius curse is not impossible to fight. If only you are strong enough in your mind, and have no part of you..." Draco couldn't bear how Crouch kept staring and staring at him most of all, so much that the other students were looking at each other and whispering about it. Crouch only looked away briefly to return the spider to the jar, before looking back at Draco and finishing, "If there's no other part that agrees with what you are tasked to do, or finds submission to another's will easier than the burden of choice. Mr. Malfoy, name another Unforgivable curse for me."

"The Cruciatus curse," Draco was forced to say, the natural next in the sequence, but Crouch's one good Polyjuiced eye lit up with so much triumph that Draco feared he had seriously miscalculated.

But he could never have imagined how fatally he'd set himself up. "Yes, the Cruciatus curse," Crouch said, "But it needs to be bigger to give the class a good idea. Malfoy, get your wand and enlarge the next spider for me." He placed it on Draco's desk, and after an impatient gesture, Draco obediently cast Engorgio. Whatever word had gone around about not making Draco do actual spells in class this first week, Crouch hadn't gotten the memo, or hadn't cared.

Except that had been just an excuse as well, as Crouch raised a hand when Draco moved to pocket his wand. "No, keep that out, Malfoy," he said, while Draco stared into the bleak compound eyes of the second spider. "Lift up your wand to show the class."

"We've seen Draco's wand loads of times before," Blaise complained, but even that didn't shake Crouch's ire from entirely on Draco.

"Ah, yes, but have you *really* seen it?" Crouch said coldly. "Lift it, Malfoy." Draco had no choice but obey, heart in his throat, and obedience did not save him from the worst he feared coming. "An object lesson for the class. This happens to be a wand exceptionally *skilled* in the Cruciatus curse."

"Draco would never do any of the Unforgivables," Pansy called out defensively. Draco gave her an empty smile before Crouch took that as his cue.

"Perhaps you are right, little girl," Moody said, his wrinkled mouth tightening and twitching with tension. "Perhaps not. But the wand's former owner, oh, she was magnificent with the curse."

He wouldn't. He wouldn't dare. He couldn't throw in my face his own crimes-

"Have none of you heard of Bellatrix Lestrange?"

Not a single Slytherin failed to react. They provided a varied gallery of shocked horror, from shrieking and jumping out of one's chair like Tracey Davis, to Vince and Greg exchanging worried glances, to Theo blanching and trying to look anywhere but Draco.

"This is a surprise to you lot?" Crouch said with savage satisfaction. "That the wand Malfoy uses, with such reputed power, is a stolen one, with *stolen power*?" It was like he was sad his old mentor had her special wand besmirched by a blood traitor touching it. "You will all have noticed Neville Longbottom in your year. Do you know what curse this wand cast on Longbottom's parents, two Aurors, over and over and over until *Malfoy's aunt* let her husband take over, and then she came back and cast it over and over and over and *over* again?"

Careful, Crouch, with your insider knowledge of the case there. And don't leave out your *part.*

"The Cruciatus curse," Tracey whispered, eyes darting between Draco and the door, like she thought the specter of Aunt Bella was about to come roaring out of his mouth as cursed dragonfire.

"And what happened to Longbottom's parents, Malfoy?" Crouch demanded, and slammed his fist down hard on Draco's desk. "*What happened to them*?"

Draco drove his nails into his thighs as hard as he could under the desk, trying not to react, not to give the imposter the satisfaction. "They were driven mad. They're still in St. Mungo's."

"Indeed," Crouch said darkly. "You will have to use your imagination, but would any of you like to see what was performed on Longbottom's parents, in the person of this spider?" He looked down at the talon wand, as if planning to do it with the very wand he spoke of.

"I wouldn't do that," Draco said tightly. "It has a tendency to burn hands other than mine."

"Crucio!" Crouch barked. When he cast it with his own wand, Draco thought for a split second it had been meant for Draco himself, before the spider in front of Draco began to writhe. *This is the way he and Aunt Bella cast it on Neville's father. On his mother.* Crouch's beady eye went more wild, turning in its socket, before he had reached in his pocket and pulled out a picture of a group of witches and wizards, and placed it beside the writhing spider. "Look at their faces. LOOK!" he bellowed.

He grabbed Draco's hand and forced his finger beside the faces of Frank and Alice Longbottom in the long photograph of the Order of the Phoenix, standing there together picturesque as could be, before they had gone mad. The panicked squeaking sounds of the spider, despite the peacefulness of the photograph, almost seemed to be emanating from within it. "Pass the photograph around the class, Malfoy, and point out the witch and wizard that *your wand* drove mad with this curse. PASS IT!" he screamed. When Draco didn't immediately obey, he slammed his fist on the desk again, and knocked the convulsing spider onto the floor.

Daphne shrieked as it almost fell on top of her feet. Draco grabbed his wand and hissed, "Stupefy!" The writhing spider fell still, and Crouch's gaze went so murderous that Draco was driven to put on a show of obedience. *Is he that desperate I take on his sins? That I suffer as he did from them?*

It is, though. It's my sin as well.

"Gather round, all, if Professor Moody wants, let's take a look at the Order of Phoenix together!" Draco barked. "See, here's Hagrid up at the top, can't miss him, there's our professor himself, can't miss him either! There's Albus Dumbledore, there's Sirius Black, Remus Lupin, Peter Pettigrew- there's James and Lily Potter, you might have heard of them- and there's Frank and Alice Longbottom back on the other side! Look at them, they do look a bit like Neville, don't they?"

"Draco," Theo said, and touched his hand. "Draco, it's alright. We can see them."

And for the rest of class, finally, Crouch let Draco stay silent.

The Dragon Ouroboros

Chapter Notes

Hey guys! To answer a question, Gryffindor and Slytherin only have Defense together in sixth year in the books. It's just in the movies it's in earlier years. Also, everyone at Hogwarts seems to know about Moody/Crouch by Order of the Phoenix, so that's how Draco knows. I wasn't sure either lol, but I looked over the book and people like Dean Thomas are openly discussing it in classes. And no, Draco does not have all the details right, because although he has his notebooks, his memory is not the best lol

Anyway, enjoy! <3

Playlist

The rest of the Defense class about Unforgivables was an exercise in breath control, and pretending his eyes could see past the blur of suppressed watering. The minute it was over, Draco jerked his head towards the door, where his classmates all followed him together. Draco led them around the corner and cast a Muffliato, then looked each one of them in the eye and hissed, "No one talks!"

"No one's going to talk to *Longbottom*. But *someone* should tell your godfather that Moody was treating you like that," Pansy began protectively, and Draco whirled to glare at her.

"If Severus ever hears a word about Moody's treatment of me in class," Draco hissed, "*Ever*, I'll hold you all collectively responsible." He felt less menacing than ready to collapse, though, so he reached into his bag and took out a draught of peace. He swallowed it down in one gulp, and damn what they thought of that. "Group culpability-"

"Draco, stop freaking out," Blaise interrupted, while Theo touched Draco's shoulder. Draco shook Theo off, and glared at Blaise. "None of us are going to say anything," Blaise went on, though Tracey Davis still looked hardly thrilled by the idea that the owner of Bellatrix Lestrange's wand was sharing a dungeon with her. "He obviously has it in for all of us, not only you. You're just an easy target." His eyes strayed down towards Draco's wand pocket, though, even as he spoke.

Draco pulled out his wand. "Go ahead! Have a good fucking look! Anyone tells, you know what will come for you! You know what I'll do! You *know*-"

"Wait, Draco," Theo said in a soft voice. When Draco followed Theo's gaze, he saw Hermione standing out the knot of Slytherins with her bag on her back, looking perplexed.

They'd arranged, he recalled, for her to meet him outside Defense to walk down together to the library.

"Hermione," Draco breathed in relief. He lifted the Muffliato, pocketed his wand, and gave an imperious gesture to shoo the Slytherins away, before charging over and throwing himself onto her. She let out a startled noise of surprise, and he buried his face in her shoulder and familiar bushy hair, hiding his distressed face from view. "Hermione, it's you, *Hermione*..."

"Frankenstein," Hermione whispered, "Are you having a panic attack?"

"I don't know," Draco whispered, "I don't think so, can't I just want a hug?"

"Oh, right, because you're so well-known for public displays of affection," Hermione sniped, but enfolded him tightly in her arms. Her hands linked around his neck. Draco felt the individual carved shape of each charm as a separate relief, two for each year they had been friends, proof of a history other than the one Crouch had thrown before him, proof there was some small part of him not completely a monster.

The Slytherins made their resentful way off, Theo raising a weak hand goodbye, but Draco stayed clinging onto Hermione in the corner of the corridor then, ignoring her attempts to find out what had upset him. She only stiffened and stopped returning the embrace, though, when a distinctive tapping sound neared them, along with heavy footsteps.

"Professor Moody," she whispered, and Draco turned to look over her shoulder. Crouch had come up, leaning on his staff, to stare at them. Draco felt the brush of the fingers of Legilimency at his mind. He just imagined them being cut on the edge of his mind's dagger, and felt a recoiling pain in return. *We probably both had the same mentor in the subject.*

"Come on, let's go!" Draco hissed, and grabbed her hand and positively ran down the stairs.

He didn't stop running until they reached the library, and he was so panting and out of sorts when he staggered in that Madam Pince nearly kicked them right out at the entrance. Hermione pleaded for him, and then led him to their table, where he folded his arms and buried his face over them. Slowly, he felt her begin to stroke his hair.

Draco didn't go to dinner that night, and she promised to ask Dobby to bring him food in his dorm, though he was always nervous about letting her around house elves for fear she'd start up all that with SPEW in the red line as well. But Dobby came with no tales of Hermione-inspired insurrection boiling up in the kitchens, and proved to have made him his favorite homestyle mint mince pie. After they played two games of wizarding chess, both of which Draco was proud to see Dobby trounce him at, Draco thought he was going to be fine, and took a nap until Astronomy. The only problem was that for some bizarre reason, Astronomy happened to be taught at the Astronomy Tower.

All the chemical help, all the visualizations, all the breathing techniques and calming memories of Luna in the world couldn't hold back the respiration fit that seized Draco then, the minute they walked into the tower and Draco saw the place where Dumbledore fell.

Draco stopped at the threshold, like his wand was stopping him, the way it had at Ollivander's. He knew it was his own legs keeping him back now. Keep him back they did, as both clammy hands seized on the doorframe to keep himself standing, digging deep into his diaphragm to draw in whatever shallow air was left to him.

Green, everything was green, the green light of the spider dying right before him by Crouch's wand, green light over the bleeding snake on the cellar floor, green light haloing Severus as he said those two unspeakable words and made the light go out of Dumbledore's eyes, after he begged him for mercy, his wand in Draco's pocket. Draco dug into his pocket, to prove to himself he wasn't back there, even with the tower as lit up by Avada Kedavra green. But the wand in his hand wasn't the talon wand, last raised against his own classmates in threat. It was the long elegant segmented shape of Dumbledore's wand- the Elder Wand, Mother had told Draco it was called after Voldemort died before Azkaban made her words meaningless, Voldemort's stolen weapon that had turned in his hand- disarmed from Dumbledore by Draco, minutes before Severus finished what Draco had been too cowardly to- Dumbledore's wand was already in his hand and it was *too late*...

His classmates and Professor Sinistra turned back to stare as Draco screamed and dropped his wand on the ground. "Draco?" Sinistra asked with a frown, walking over to him. Draco didn't want her to see Dumbledore's wand there like a bloody knife, caught green-handed, but there it was. She wasn't looking down, though, just at Draco's panting face, with genuinely more concern than irritation. That came, Draco knew, from her status as one of the few professors at Hogwarts at a 'civil acquaintance' level of relationship with Severus. She would not want to be the one on whose watch his godson crumbled.

"Don't look," Draco said, but he couldn't bring himself to touch the Elder Wand either. He stepped in front of it, but when it looked back, it was still there, still waiting for him to pick it up and leave Dumbledore helpless for Severus to finish him off. "Don't... don't, please don't..."

"What is it?" Sinistra asked, and Draco reached into his bag at his side for any calming or peace draughts and found he'd already taken all of them. And nothing would change the unbearable fact that Dumbledore had died because Draco was a coward. Wormtail's voice was speaking, from his own mouth, *I had no choice, he would have killed me, I had no choice, he would have killed me...*

Draco fell to his knees and vomited on the cold black stone of the tower, shaking uncontrollably as he panted, finding it so hard to breathe he felt like he could asphyxiate on his own sick, in front of every Slytherin in his year, who he so needed to fear him, not that he had ever been able to make Theo scared of him. But now none of them would- just disgust or worse, pity...

Draco turned and the Elder Wand was still there and his hands dropped to the floor too and he threw up again, gasping retching not dry for once with the sobs that were streaming out of him, and it was hard to believe blood was not starting pouring out too, the blood of a snake...

He clutched onto the dragon Ouroboros he was making for Hermione, which he'd put on a cord necklace around his neck in the dorms, under his uniform, to be sure no one could take from him again, and tried to steady himself, tracing the sharp bumps of its spine around its

endless self-devouring circle, but the devouring had ended, and now the dragon was retching itself up. The bile seemed to climb up higher and higher in his neck, up until his nose could feel too much acid to hold back, and he was retching again, eyes too blurred at least to see the mess he made, as he clung onto the charm for Hermione...

Time passed before Sinistra's enchanted note could summon Severus from his chambers, and he came soon enough that he must not have been sleeping yet. He took one look at Draco's shivering form, sick and the talon wand strewn around him, and began to bark furiously at Sinistra, saying she should have canceled the whole class, sent the others away to give Draco space...

"Wait," Draco called through his bile-burned throat, as the others began to flee from the tower without any further command necessary. "Tell and it won't just be Langlock, I'll use the Oscausi curse on you all, *everyone*- ask Theo, he'll know what it means, or look it up! *Oscausi*-"

"Draco," Severus said, helping him up, putting the wand in Draco's pocket, and leading him down the stairs past the other petrified Slytherins. "Draco, just try and breathe. It's going to be alright. Why didn't you take your draught of peace?" he whispered as they outpaced the others, Severus keeping him physically from falling. "Did it not help? Draco?"

"I'd already taken it," Draco groaned, "Earlier today- Severus, they all saw me, they know I'm weak, they're going to tell- they're going to *destroy* me, Severus- my wand, take me to the Headmaster's office, I need to give it to Dumbledore before- before-"

"Quiet," Severus said, "Just breathe," and Draco shut his mouth and tried to breathe.

Draco spent the night in Severus's rooms that night, and at least when he woke up, his wand was the talon wand again. He was excused from classes for the rest of the week, as Pomfrey was apparently furious that they'd ignored her earlier recommendation he rest for the entire week. Easy to let Severus attribute Draco's fit to the magical exhaustion, rather than psychological failings. That was convenient enough. Draco used that excuse in his minimal dialogue with his dormmates, in the annoying slivers of time when he had to leave his locked muffled bed curtains to relieve himself or get food from Dobby or deliveries of notes and homework from a cautious but helpful Theo.

He told them all he was suffering from sickness after the magical overcharge he'd suffered at the Cup, which they believed readily enough. When he tried, though, to specify that his fight with the Ministry wizards had been unprovoked, and he hadn't summoned the Dark Mark, they didn't seem to put much stock in it. "So they all just attacked you for no reason?" Blaise asked skeptically.

"Oh, yes," Draco drawled, "You must be right, I *must* be guilty if they came after us, far be it from me to place any doubt on the impeccable judicial procedures of the *Ministry of Magic*."

By Saturday, he'd had enough of their combination of fear for him and fear of him, every time he left his bed, which seemed to suffuse the air of the dorm like a thin green poison. He

told Theo he was going to go out flying that night, using the weekend night flight permission slip he still had from Severus, not that Severus would have been pleased to hear he meant to use it. "Alone," he added, with a menacing glare. "I'm only telling you so you all don't figure out I've gone and panic."

He planned to go alone, but it didn't stay that way. He left the dorm after all of his dormmates were asleep, and one good thing about being a Slytherin was how quick a walk it was up the dungeon stairs to the ground floor, and then out the entrance hall onto the grounds, where the Quidditch pitch awaited at a longer walk away. He exhausted himself in the walk by the time he made it close to the broomshed, but that was alright. He didn't actually need to go and fly.

There was a physical relief to just breathing in the night air, the September breeze brushing over him less chilled than he had assumed. He didn't have to cast his usual warming charm. He just tossed off his fur cloak and lay it beneath himself as a pillow, dropping onto his back on the Quidditch pitch and lying there, staring up trying to find the Draco constellation, without any luck. *You're still alive,* he told himself in that long withdrawal from the outside world, outside time, outside any sense of belonging anytime or anywhere or with anyone. *Whatever you are, whatever you've done, you're still breathing in and out, you can still see the stars.*

And then the stars were blotted out by a boy suddenly appearing above him in bits and pieces, an invisibility cloak pulled off to reveal the unmistakable bright red hair of a Weasley. "Ron?" Draco frowned, putting a hand as a visor over his forehead and squinting up in the moonlight.

"Hey," Ron said, and looked around surreptitiously before sitting down. "You still have permission to do this, right? And, uh, do you mind if I sit down?"

"I'm not in any state to stop you," Draco drawled, and Ron lay right down beside him.

"I was invited," Ron said weakly, and at Draco's dubious stare, raised his hands and quickly added, "By your friend Nott, okay? He came up after dinner and took me aside, said he knew you and I had used to go flying together, and that I should go with you tonight. He seemed, like, real worried about you, mate. He said the same thing Harry did, that you've been sick from magic exhaustion. And that you wouldn't talk to *them*. I know you probably wanted to be alone, but..."

"No," Draco said, like some kind of bloody Gryffindor, "It's alright," and found he didn't want to send Ron away. "Hey, what do you think?" He pulled out the Ouroboros charm, currently on a necklace, and showed Ron, who examined it carefully in the moonlight. "It's for Hermione's birthday next week. Don't worry, I should be done with Pomfrey's bed rest by then. So is it ready?"

Ron frowned, turning it in his hand. "What is it?"

Draco laughed, the first genuine laugh he could remember in days. "If you can't tell, Cannon, then it probably isn't ready yet."

"No, let me see. Will you cover your eyes?" Draco did, and Ron cast a Lumos. "Let's see, it's like a snake... no, a dragon, but it's a look- it looks like it's biting its own tail! That's wicked!"

"You know what that's called, Ron," Draco said, and Ron put out the charm, so Draco could look up to see him shake his head. "An Ouroboros. They're usually snakes, but this is a dragon one. You wanna hear what it means?" Ron nodded with what looked like genuine enthusiasm, then lay back down over the grass, and listened. He was happy after to answer Draco's questions about what he'd missed in his sickbed, and was sure to impress on Draco how worried they had been.

"The Slytherins wouldn't say much, when you just stopped going to class or meals," Ron explained. "Just that you were sick, so we went to the kitchens, and Dobby told us he was bringing you meals, and that you were fine, just really tired, and that it was magic exhaustion, but your panic attacks too. Don't be mad, he could just see how worried Harry was, and you know how Dobby is about *The Harry Potter*." He did a squeaky impression of Dobby's awed voice, and made Draco laugh again. "And Luna thought we should all give you some space and let you rest, but it'll be nice to be able to tell everyone tomorrow that you're not, like, on death's door or anything."

"Tomorrow," Draco said, "This infusion Severus is making should be ready for me, and it should help the magical exhaustion, at least..."

He had never had quite so long a conversation with Ron, but it couldn't have felt any more natural, thinking out loud as they caught each other up, and then Ron was won over from thinking Moody was cool to despising their new Defense teacher for bullying Draco into this state. Draco actually had to laughingly dissuade Ron from swearing revenge. "Come on, Ron, what could you do to him?" Draco sighed, and Ron wasn't long in coming up with a credible answer.

"I'd set Fred and George on him!"

Draco was falling asleep where they lay, his throat sore from talking so long, by the time Ron made noises about how they should go to bed. They parted in the entrance hall, Ron slipping back on the cloak. Draco said a quiet thank you to the space where Ron had just been, and felt an invisible hand punch him chummily in the shoulder, before they turned to go their separate ways, Ron to ascend and Draco to descend.

That seemed to tide the Gryffindors over until Draco's eventual return to classes, which he whined to Severus he was absolutely not up to until the next Wednesday and with it Defense had passed. The second Thursday of classes, he was suddenly miraculously well. He had been feeling far more energetic, off a combination of excessive sleep, potions, Dobby's lovingly chosen food in great quantity, and most of all the angel's infusion baths. Those not only gave Draco a returning sense of magic thrumming ready through his veins to his fingertips, but also gave him the chance to catch a glimpse of Cedric Diggory shirtless in the prefects' bathroom, and who after that could *not* conclude that all was right with the world?

Draco used his last days in bed to put the finishing touches on Hermione's Ouroboros, boring in at last a tiny hole through one end, which would let her slide it onto the bracelet in place of one of the plain turquoises. It was if anything more beautiful than Severus's ring, which was

saying something, and had definitely taken far more work, either from his weakened magic or just his elevated standards by now. He wore it on the plain leather cord under his clothes all the time, under the belief that this would prevent anyone from finding it and handling it but him. But his distrust of his dormmates served him ill. He should have just hidden it somewhere on his bed, and kept it out of sight until the moment he wrapped it for her.

Granted, it was still Draco's fault, that Wednesday the seventeenth of September, two days before Hermione's birthday, and his first day reluctantly returning to Defense. He had been feeling more relief than anything, having made it through the class unscathed, though he didn't like the sound of Crouch announcing that next week would mark the start of more 'practical hands-on experience'. He had drifted off, daydreaming about the birthday party to come for Hermione, and got out the charm to check it over one more time, only for a hand to seize it like Karkaroff's had, with far less readiness to let go.

"What's this, Malfoy? Some kind of amulet? Why are you feeling at it? Casting some kind of curse?" Crouch boomed, and when Draco flushed and hesitated fatally at answering, Crouch glared and ripped it off the necklace, one hard pull enough to detach it.

"Hey! Wait!" Draco called, jumping to his feet with his heart in his throat, at the sight of the precious charm in hostile hands again. "No, it's not magical, it's just jewelry, it's not even for me-"

"Then why are you wearing it, Malfoy?" Crouch barked. "You- think- you're- so- *clever*, don't you? Think you can go around *wearing the Dark Mark* and no one will notice?"

As if you *don't know what the Dark Mark* actually *looks like.*

But the imposter held it up in the air for everyone to see with vicious satisfaction. "Clear as day, laddie! Green and black, and here's the snake, and look, it's being eaten and all... so you've gone from casting it, to wearing it to *class*... next thing, it will be tattooed on your skin, Malfoy!"

"He makes charms like that for Hermione Granger, she's Muggleborn, it's not a Dark Mark," Theo said, and Crouch acted like he hadn't spoken.

"It's eating its own tail, there's no skull," Draco pleaded, voice rising hysterically and doing his case no favors. Not Crouch didn't know that, but if he could shame him in front of an audience. "Look, there's no skull, it's not the Dark Mark, it's an Ouroboros- you're a *professor*, you must know what an Ouroboros is-"

That hint of disdain hardened Crouch that last bit to action. "I won't have the Dark Mark in my classroom. CONSTANT VIGILANCE!" he barked, and tossed it in the air. Draco sprang for it, hoping this meant the end of this farcical scene, only for Crouch to yell, "REDUCTO!" Draco had to jump back from the explosion in the air, and what fell into his hands after was only fine turquoise-colored dust.

Draco had never so quickly traversed the halls, nearly stampeding over any number of first-years in his sprint to the dungeons in search of Severus. When he busted into the Potions classroom, and then the storerooms and finally Severus's chambers, he found the man nowhere in sight. Defense had run late, and Severus had already gone to dinner. So Draco was free to slump into one of the armchairs and cry. He broke off in an aborted effort at bettering the situation, stealing an iron pipe link from Severus's bathroom, but found it impossible to transfigure into turquoise. Whether from lingering magical exhaustion or his own mental disarray, there was no telling.

Severus found him curled up there, sniffling into his own sleeve, once dinner was over, and demanded an explanation for his absence at dinner. The story came out in fits and bursts, with Draco feeling ridiculous to even tell it, let alone be caught crying over it. Severus had lost so many things in his life more important than a bloody piece of little jewelry- but then again, so had Draco, and cry he was nonetheless, nothing like a panic attack, just childish, impotent frustration.

He was so tempted. So tempted to expose Crouch now and damn the consequences, damn it if the next plan that came was one he couldn't predict at all to stop. He just wanted Crouch *gone*...

"This is a charm you carved yourself?" Severus sighed. "For that bracelet of Granger's you have dedicated so many irreplaceable hours to, which could have gone towards bettering yourself and your magic?" Draco nodded blearily. "How long did you spend on it?"

"I don't know," Draco said, wiping his nose, "I've been working on it since June," and Severus's eyes hardened, all the more when Draco added, "I'm sorry, I know it's stupid- it's just that her birthday is *Friday*, and I don't have time- I don't know what's wrong with me, but I tried the transfiguration and it didn't work right now-" He showed Severus the rusty dark blue excuse for turquoise from his lap. "She wanted a dragon Ouroboros like yours, and I had it, I had it *perfect*, it took *so long*, and now I can't even make the stone-"

"Draco," Severus said, and began to rub his shoulders. "Draco, calm down." And slowly, Draco calmed down enough to tell himself that it was not a good idea to potentially doom the wizarding world to eternal darkness because some asshole had *wrecked his jewelry.*

And what Severus proceeded to do, over the next two days, was perhaps the most he had surprised Draco in either timeline- more than *anyone* had, even including Severus's decision to take him to save Uncle Sirius.

Severus told Draco that he would handle it. Draco just assumed he would find some other present last-minute, maybe a Potions ingredient or even some other sort of jewelry. Rumors of Severus spotted in the Transfiguration stacks, as well as in McGonagall's office, should have clued Draco in to Severus's real intentions, but he was astonished enough to cry out when he was summoned to Severus's chambers on Friday morning, and Severus pushed the Dragon Ouroboros charm into his hands. It was just as it had been before Crouch destroyed it. Perhaps better.

"What... how did you..." Draco breathed. For a mad moment he considered whether Severus had stolen a Time-Turner from McGonagall, and rescued the charm from the past. Then

Severus took off his own ring and placed it side by side.

"I had a model to work from," Severus said without expression. For the first time, Draco noticed the deep, dark circles under his eyes, like he had pulled more than one sleepless night.

"Severus!" Draco exclaimed. "You... you made this for her?"

"For *you*, Draco," Severus said tightly, grimacing emphatically. "Mainly from duplication charms of the ring you made me. It was not difficult. And rest assured, if word of the true provenance of this present ever passes between you and another living soul, I will personally apply a Reducto charm to *every* charm on that godforsaken bracelet of hers you value so much-"

"Severus!" Draco wailed, and tried to fling himself into Severus's arms. Severus leaped out of his armchair and retreated behind it to prevent his godson's display of affection, but he was unable to completely hold back a smile as Draco just kept waving his arms going, "Severus! Severus!"

"Tell her *you* made it," Severus said. "Do not scruple to take the credit, Draco. You have endured enough in the past month to give yourself a win."

"I can't believe you *did* this," Draco said wide-eyed, "You really are the best-"

"Don't say it-"

"The best godfather-"

"Don't say it-"

"The best godfather that ever-"

"I sent Aurors after you," Severus reminded him, and Draco just jumped up and down a bit at that, he was so ecstatically happy.

"I needed the dueling experience!" he shouted rapturously.

Hermione had her Dragon Ouroboros charm, as requested. And Potter went out of his way to compliment it, as they all went flying that Friday night, at the tail end of her Dobby-catered party out on the Quidditch pitch. Being Severus's godson really did have perks, with all the special permissions Draco had been given to make it happen. Dean and Seamus brought paper lanterns and enchanted them to hang high in the sky all around the pitch. They flew back down for Dobby's cake delivery and sang her Happy Birthday, allowing Luna to sing her two extra verses that no one else knew to the song, before they could cut it.

Ron and Neville ran around pushing extra Butterbeers on everyone, Hermione prevailed on Dobby to stay and celebrate with them rather than leave right after his delivery, and the eleven of them so were sugar-high and giddy with the occasion that Hermione declared it her best birthday ever, even before Fred and George produced custom birthday fireworks for Ginny to set off.

Ordinarily, Hermione might have protested the illicit discharge of fireworks on school grounds, but instead, she laughed and waved her arms in the air, the Dragon Ouroboros in its place of pride on her wrist, every intricate curve of its spine lit up by orbs of brilliant electric indigo above them, which mimicked Hermione's favorite bluebell flames. And Potter caught the direction of Draco's stare, and told Draco he could never believe what a talented wizard Draco was.

No, Barty Crouch Jr. had not managed to spoil Hermione's birthday.

Dear Frankenstein,

I'm still pinching myself after your last letter. Remus says he can believe it, after our dear old schoolfriend intervened to save me from Dementors, but I confess still I find it past me. Are you quite sure you have not been practicing the Imperius curse on your beloved godfather? It's one thing for him to battle dark forces, very well. But to carve birthday jewelry for a Muggleborn girl, who Harry has assures me he dislikes almost as intensely and unjustifiably as Harry himself? I think if you were making up tales to try and reconcile me and your godfather, you would have invented something more plausible.

As for Mad-Eye Moody, well, he's always been a weird sort, hasn't he? There were wild tales going about of him even when I was your age. But I think we can both personally attest to his skill as a mentor. We had to duel one of his protégés, our cousin Tonks. If it hadn't been for your quick thinking then, you might be in Azkaban right now, and I'd just be in post-Dementor's Kiss la-la land. So if she's that good, imagine what Moody must be like in a duel. I guess that's my uncle way of saying, more bluntly, that no matter how much of a dick he is, you should try not to fuck with him. He's not someone who you want to get on his bad side. If you want him to leave you alone, keep your head down as much as you can.

Not that hearing what he did to you in front of the whole class didn't make me want to go back to Hogwarts and take on the old bastard myself.

And trust me, Draco. I've known you long enough by now, and unlike most people, I can definitely say I knew my cousin Bella. Just because you wield her wand, it doesn't mean you're a thing like her. Not a damn thing.

Sincerely,

Not Meatball

Draco would have liked to think he got used to Crouch's lessons, but it would have been a lie. While Potter's trio all seemed to find fourth year more difficult than their first three, Draco only struggled in his new classes, Arithmancy and Ancient Runes, and of course in Defense, where Crouch began to put the Imperius curse on them. He claimed it was to familiarize them and train them to defend themselves from it. Draco thought it was a thinly veiled excuse for Crouch to take out some of his many unresolved psychological issues on his students.

He said it was Dumbledore's command, although Draco had the suspicion Dumbledore had just gone along with whatever Crouch wanted, when it came to finding someone to look after Karkaroff at Hogwarts this year, or just to find anybody to take the position at all. His other theory was that Dumbledore had been more than happy to alter the entire year's curriculum for Potter, and the maddening part of that was that it probably would in the future. He heard talk that *Potter* could resist it, just as in the blue loop. It kept him from those temptations to unveil Crouch early.

The first time Crouch did it to them was at the start of October, though it repeated over the next few classes. Draco had heard talk of the fluffy things the Gryffindors had been made to do under the Imperius, like singing and animal impressions, but the Slytherins did not have it so easy. Tracey Davis was made to kiss one of Crouch's spiders, Pansy got on her knees and crawled from front to back of the room, Daphne pulled Pansy's hair, Millie held her face in a bowl underwater, and that was just the girls. Greg had to eat a cave spider whole, Vince put Blaise in a headlock, Theo had to sing a song about Gryffindor, and Blaise was made to get on his knees and kiss the bottom of Pansy's shoes. Of all of them, only Blaise showed any success in resisting the first time, jerking about awkwardly in front of a humiliated Pansy's legs, so it was more a sequence of humiliations than anything. And then was Draco, leaving the best for last.

"Imperio!" Crouch shouted, and Draco's mind went blank, all of the anxiety about the curse dropping away. It was not an unfamiliar feeling, after the number of times Aunt Bella had put him under it, but then again, he'd never managed to fight it off even the slightest bit. She'd claimed all their work with Occlumency would help, but it had never seemed to, though at a certain point he'd given up on fighting her at all. He'd just waited for her to get tired of it and give up, while she took each failure of more evidence of his fundamental weakness to gleefully deliver to his mother.

She'd put him under it so much that there was no quite so much pleasantness to its floating calm as there had been at the start of their lessons, so there was no joy in it, nor was there any in the slimy crawling feeling of Crouch in his head, but somehow he could not get him out of it. He was left paralyzed and dumb as Crouch's voice said, *Pick up your pen.* After a long frozen moment, Draco picked up the pen. *Roll up your sleeve,* the voice said, and Draco did.

Draw the Dark Mark on your wrist, the voice said, and Draco's left arm shot out to try and hold his right hand back, while they began to grapple with each other. *Now!* the voice said, and a wave of bliss swept through Draco so much he began to eagerly trace out the shape on his arm. "That's it," Crouch said aloud, "Draw it, show everyone exactly who you are," and his voice in Draco's head said, *Draw the skull now, don't get the eyes wrong, this is who you are...*

"He's crying," Pansy's voice said from far away, but Draco finished drawing the mark.

After that Defense class, he could not have missed their old Defense professor more. In private, his fellow Slytherins had to concur. "Lupin was preparing us for the material we'll be tested on at least. How will torture help us get Os on our OWLs?" Theo asked crossly, as he helped Draco try to scrub off the ink from his wrist.

"Forget Lupin," Blaise sighed, "It almost makes me miss *Lockhart*," and they had to grimly agree, though Vince looked perplexed.

"Isn't he supposed to be a total liar or something now?" Vince mused. "The Prophet says he was nothing but a fraud all along. That he made it up to sell books..."

"But we've seen what a *real* veteran of loads of battles against the dark arts is like," Millie said drolly. "Which would *you* prefer?"

"You're right, Millie," Vince said. Vince tended to always think Millie was right, but the rest of them nodded solemnly in agreement as well.

So yeah, Defense was not their favorite class.

Most of the rest was a piece of cake, though, Potions most of all. Draco was more challenged each Saturday, when in the afternoons he took back up playing football with Seamus, Dean, and Hermione, and in the nights he and Ron took back up their night flying and Quidditch practice. Draco had to send Potter away not one, not two, but three weeks in a row, until Potter finally got the hint he wasn't welcome.

"Listen," Draco hissed the third time, drawing Potter aside into one of the stands while Ron flew aimless resentful circles on the other side of the pitch. "This is Ron and I's thing, alright? Not yours, Potter. This is not the place to insert yourself."

"You mean so you and Ron can develop a better friendship?" Potter asked, looking like he was trying to be sensitive and insightful.

"No, Potter," Draco hissed, and made sure to say it right in Potter's ear so there was never a chance in hell Ron could hear. It would be too humiliating for Ron to ever want to be friends with Draco again, or it would have been for Draco in Ron's shoes, but apparently Potter was oblivious enough he had to spell it out. "I mean so Ron has a thing for himself, just one thing that you don't also do and do better."

Potter still looked blank. "Merlin, Potter, you don't think it's bad enough for him you've played Quidditch since first year, and he never got to, and now it's cancelled this year and he still can't? Not to mention you're richer, more famous and popular, better in classes and magic, better-looking, better at everything except chess and telling jokes? You don't see how hard it must be for him to always be in your shadow? When he's been in his brothers' shadows his whole life already?"

"You think I'm better-looking than Ron?" Potter asked, which, okay, not supposed to be the take-away there. Draco looked him dead in the eye, and did what he did when Potter was being an absolute blockhead, pushing aside the hair on his forehead and poking at his scar. When he was really mad at him, he did it with his wand. But Potter wasn't being purposefully hurtful, just oblivious, so only his right index it was. Potter, who sometimes seemed to love being scolded, smiled at that, which made the whole gesture counterproductive, and yet Draco did it.

"That's not the point," Draco sighed. "The point is, don't you remember what he saw in the Mirror of Erised? He saw himself winning the Quidditch Cup and House Cup and getting all the accolades for himself. Why wouldn't he be jealous of you?"

"Jealous?" Potter asked, and actually rolled his eyes at Draco, though he didn't move Draco's prodding finger. "You're so mean about him, Draco. I thought you two got along these days. He's not jealous of me, he's my friend-"

"And that precludes jealousy?" Draco asked in exasperation. Maybe Potter wouldn't have been suited to Slytherin after all. "Never mind, Potter, just take my word for it that it would be good for you two to have some different hobbies, alright?"

"But why does *he* get to go flying with you and not me?" Potter whined, but wilted at Draco's glare. "Sorry, I mean, I guess I kind of get what you're saying- but it's not like I'm not jealous of Ron sometimes, you know? You don't think I'd trade all that Boy Who Lived nonsense for what *he* has? A real family?" It *had* been what Potter saw in that mirror. "Forget it, it just sucks, okay? You hang out with everyone *else*. You and Hermione have your studying, you and Ron have your flying, you and Luna hang out with Dobby and the other house elves and read the Quibbler together. The Slytherins live with you, you help Neville in Potions, and Seamus and Dean even get to play football with you. I'm the only one who doesn't get any special time with you, Draco. I mean, I know I'm your least favorite, but still..."

Potter was definitely whining now, more puerile than even Draco's most damning verbal portrait of Ron could have been. "If you don't want to hang out with me, just say so. I know I'm not as cool as you, but..."

Had Harry bloody Potter actually just said that to him? *I know I'm not as cool as you?*

"Okay, okay," Draco said hastily. "Just please stop embarrassing yourself, you don't know how traumatizing this is for me personally. So you want us to have a thing to do together?"

Draco tried as hard as he could to make that sound innuendo-free. Weeks of school had gotten him more used to Potter's handsomeness, which he wore as clueless of his appeal as if he looked like a Horklump, and didn't just have the emotional *awareness* of one. But it was hard to not let his mind go inadvisable places when he had to whisper in Potter's ear, in a crisp October night where the chill made Potter's warmth that much more tempting to snuggle close to. *Basilisk corpse,* he told himself, his short and sweet mantra, *He'd sooner snog a Basilisk corpse than you-*

"Like what?" Potter asked, and Draco looked up, fearing Ron would end up feeling neglected and unwanted anyway, after all this fuss for his sake. "What can we do together?"

Oh, Potter. If you understood anything about Slytherins, you would not have asked me that question. Draco tried to keep his mind appropriate, even if it would have been a losing effort for his real fourteen-year-old self, who would have already taken that thought very dirtily. "How about when it comes time for Hogsmeade, we can go together, just you and I? Meet up with the others if you like, but now that Dumbledore took your permission slip from Uncle Sirius, and you can come- I'll spend as much of the Hogsmeade weekends with just you as you like."

Draco knew he'd miscalculated from how huge Potter's eyes went. "You mean like a date?"

"No!" Draco said hastily. *Basilisk corpse, Basilisk corpse...* "No, as *friends*, Potter, Merlin, get your mind out of the gutter, not everyone is trying to lick the Chosen One's boots, let alone any *choicer* parts..." And now *Draco's* mind was in the gutter, and not coming out anytime soon.

"Sorry," Potter said, looking down. "I'm sorry. Sorry, yeah, no, that would be great. Okay, I'll let you two have fun. Bye!" He called out his goodbyes to Ron and ran off, but his presence was felt long after his departure. Draco found it singularly difficult to focus on anything but the image of going on a date to Hogsmeade with Potter- on the thought that Potter had thought Draco was asking him out, and had not immediately punched him in the face for it, objectively an improvement from what he would previously have thought the most realistic scenario...

"Harry really messes with your head, doesn't he," Ron laughed, diving to grab the Quaffle after Draco just let it hit his arm for a third time rather than catching it. He swooped back up with a cheeky grin. "What were you whispering about over there anyway? I thought you might like Nott these days. Don't tell me you fancy *Harry*-"

"*Excuse* me," Draco said indignantly. "Who would be interested in either of those little runts when there is still a dreamy *Diggory* at Hogwarts-"

"Whose dad almost sent you to Azkaban?"

Draco stopped flying to glare at Ron, and when Ron threw him the Quaffle, he threw it back with excessive force. "Okay, fine! Maybe I don't fancy Diggory that much anymore. But there's your *brother,* Ron- don't look at me like that, the age difference isn't *that* bad- and he owns a *whip*-"

"You're trying to gross me out, aren't you," Ron said, staring at him too knowingly, "To distract me," and Draco was glad it was night to hide how deep his flush had gone.

"Play *Quidditch*, Ronald," Draco said loftily, "And maybe you'll be Gryffindor Keeper next year, and not just in the stands cheering on your brothers anymore."

The Tower in the Cup

Chapter Notes

Playlist

Draco was soon mercifully delivered with more boys to pretend to fancy instead of Potter. The announcement went up in the Entrance Hall on the 27th of the impending arrival of Beauxbatons and Durmstrang, which Luna called an inauspicious date for the information to be shared. "I don't know why," she said with a frown, "But whenever I think of the tournament, I get this strange feeling it's not going to go well. I keep seeing portents in Divination about it, and Professor Trelawney keeps giving me bad grades on assignments. But it's what the tea leaves *say,* I think." Draco was breathless, thinking she was truly onto something, until she frowned and asked, "Do you think that means Hogwarts's champion is going to come in third?"

They came upon the Gryffindors straining to see the announcement as well, and Ron seemed smug upon hearing Luna's prediction. "You see," he said with a sneer at Hermione, "If Cedric Diggory does get chosen, he'll put Hogwarts in the crapper, you'll see. Just because he's *handsome*-"

"I told you, I don't think he'd do well because he's handsome," Hermione said crossly, "Whatever you say about *Lockhart*," and was forced to suffer Ron gleefully telling Luna the saga of Hermione's crush on Lockhart. Luna offered her own dismal stories of first-year Defense with the man, before gossiping about the victims suing the publishing company and Lockhart being virtually tried despite his absence. Draco had already heard all about this, so he picked up a step to lean in and tease Potter.

"Why... so... *distracted*?"

Potter hadn't been saying much, nor did he try to walk with them, so his preoccupied air made Draco wonder if his scar had been hurting again, and not just from Draco poking at it all the time. "Imagining all the sexy students we'll be getting from abroad?"

Potter didn't fall for the bait. "No," Potter said absently, trailing his hand along the banner of the staircase as they ascended, like for once he needed to touch it to keep his balance. "I just was imagining if Cedric Diggory *does* get chosen as champion. Hermione seems to think it's likely. She says he's a good student and all. And he's supposed to be attractive, right? You had that banner last year. *Dreamy Diggory?* You'd like it if he got chosen as champion, wouldn't you?"

"If you hadn't noticed, Potter," Draco said, wrinkling his nose, "The pitch of my ardor has somewhat cooled after making the acquaintance of one of the prospective in-laws."

Potter carried on as if he hadn't heard him. "But you- you'd think it was cool, wouldn't you, if he got chosen? And if he did all those dangerous tasks- if he won- you'd be really impressed with him, wouldn't you? Would you want to snog him and all that even more then?"

"Luna," Draco called, "I need your help, the Wrackspurts have gone to Potter's brain!"

Draco wished there was a betting market about who would be chosen as the champions. He could have again made a killing at it. Maybe the Weasley twins would have set one up if they hadn't also been trying to get in. It was kind of sad, witnessing their plotting from afar knowing its uselessness, and the morbidity of all the castle-cleaning and rumors and excitement, with the knowledge that one victor would come back tortured, and the other just plain dead. *Not this time. I won't let it happen. I won't fail Potter again.*

Draco tried to take the Triwizard Tournament for what it was, and not let himself dwell on its ending in the blue loop. He put himself up to appreciating the new banners in the Great Hall, at least the Slytherin-themed ones, and actually made himself smile, quipping to Hermione that the great H at the front, in the Hogwarts coat of arms, stood like the charm on her wrist, for *H for Hermione.*

"And G isn't for Gryffindor, it's for Granger. At the very least there should be a Granger house," Draco decided, "You're far too good for Gryffindor," and laughed at the protests that earned him from the Gryffindor boys. "She's smarter than any Ravenclaw but my cousin, after all! It's lucky she isn't there. With Hermione and Luna both in that house, I'd spend all my time there, you'd never see me..."

"What a tragedy," Ron said, and mimed gagging, while Potter looked adorably pouty.

The twins came up and began to complain about how McGonagall wouldn't tell them how the champions were chosen. "It's a goblet," Draco said, dedicated to spoiling all the fun surprises for the Gryffindors, though his conscience made him refuse to add more. If Fred were to die again in the red line, he would prefer it not be on his watch.

"He's full of shit," George complained. "What would he know about it, anyway?"

Draco gave the excuse that always worked. "My father told me."

Knowing what was to come, with the grand entrances by ship and flying carriage, it was actually kind of a drag to line himself up in front of the castle with all the other excited children. He wanted to shout at the carriages, just leave Krum and Delacour, send all the rest of your lot home and save us some time. Oh, and if the ship could take Karkaroff back off with it, that would be optimal. Draco was hardly looking forward to seeing him again. Although he was curious if he had managed to do something about the talon wand's brand, where Mother and Sirius hadn't.

Not that it would be easy to get the story of any solution out of Karkaroff anyway.

Merlin, Karkaroff was almost here. Just what Draco needed, another enemy in this castle. It was ironic, knowing his history with Crouch, that they hated each other, both the fake Moody

and the real Crouch, and yet they would both be there hating Draco as well. It really was a curse to Draco, this universal likeability of his.

When the carriage came, people started shouting it was a dragon. *Not yet.* "Don't be stupid... it's a flying house," one of the Gryffindors said.

Draco just closed his eyes and yelled, "It's a carriage, obviously, shut your mouths!"

It was a carriage, discharging its cargo of pretentious French children and their pretentious giant headmistress- all of very little interest to Draco, at least until one of the curly-haired girls pointed over at Draco and started trying to catch his eye. Draco didn't recognize her, wondering if this was some cousin he didn't know about- probably a closer relation than Luna- except then Madame Maxime finished introducing herself and her pupils to Dumbledore, and took note of the curly-haired girl and a few others whispering. Together, Draco recognized them with a sinking heart as the girls he'd spoken to in the forest, on the night of the World Cup final.

"Girls! Come 'ere! Rosamonde! Estelle! Odette! Dumbly-dorr, these girls 'ave a debt to 'Ogwarts!" Madame Maxime enthused, and then the curly-haired girl, apparently called Odette, stepped forward and whispered in her ear. "I took some of my pupils to ze World Cup!" Her booming giantess voice could not be missed by a single Hogwarts student. "My girls were lost in ze woods, and one of your students 'as 'elped my pupils, and advised zem when zey were scared and in danger! Before we may enter your school, we must thank zis young man, to whom we are in debt!"

Draco shrunk back behind Vince and Greg, normally a good bet to avoid being seen, but Odette had already spotted him. "Zere he is!" Odette called, and beckoned him over. "'E is ze boy who 'elped us when ze evil men attacked! Madame Maxime, ze boy with ze light hair who is 'iding! We were looking for you, and 'e told us not to be afraid, and what to do! 'E is right zere!"

"Do not be modest, young man!" Madame Maxime boomed ecstatically. "Come 'ere and receive ze thanks of Beauxbatons, for your chivalry to my pupils!"

The ranks of Slytherin parted like magic for Odette and her fetching dark curls, even Vince and Greg. "Traitors," he muttered, before Odette dragged him to the front. As if he needed the student body reminded once more that he had been in the woods when the Dark Mark went up.

"Well," Dumbledore said, looking less surprised than he should have. "If it isn't Mr. Malfoy. One of our fourth-years, Madame Maxime. Already an accomplished wizard, and, it seems, a charitable young man!"

Draco cast his gaze around desperately for the teachers, trying to find Severus and project his distress call with his eyes. *Please get me out of this, I promise I won't make you ever make any presents for Gryffindors again...*

The least Karkaroff could do was break up this humiliation by showing up, but no. Draco kissed Madame Maxime's hand, gave his best smiles to the girls, and had to suffer the

applause of the entire Beauxbatons student body before he was allowed to slink back to the Slytherins. They all eyed him like a Hufflepuff imposter in their midst.

"Draco Malfoy, protector of the innocent?" Theo leaned in to whisper teasingly in his ear.

"Shut the fuck up," Draco hissed, and turned to face forward and resolutely waited for Durmstrang. *No good deed gone unpunished*.

At least Karkaroff hadn't witnessed that bizarre display, but the moment he disembarked from his ship, his eyes were searching over the assembled Hogwarts students, going right to the Slytherin section. Draco had concealed himself behind Vince and Greg this time, though, so even his bright hair couldn't give him away. Still, he had the feeling he wasn't going to get through an entire year without a single other run-on with Karkaroff. Who had on fur gloves, so he was dedicated to being of no use at all.

Draco couldn't figure out why everyone was going crazy during the Durmstrang arrival, until he eavesdropped on the girls and heard them cooing over Krum. To him it seemed self-evident that Krum should be here- after all, someone had to be Durmstrang champion, and take Hermione to the Yule Ball- but they didn't know that, and he was the weird one, unimpressed by the boy who'd caught the Snitch in the last World Cup final. Which had, after all, won Draco a very satisfying bet.

That wasn't enough to put the jury out one way or another, though, whether the Seeker was worthy to take Hermione. He would have to keep a close watch on the older boy to make his judgment, and if he proved unworthy, Draco had all sorts of creative ways in mind to ensure he kept his paws off Draco's best friend. If that indelibly altered the blue loop, well, so be it.

He got to inspect Krum from up close quickly, as just like last time, Durmstrang took up what were only their natural seats at the Slytherin table. Draco caught Ron staring over enviously, having tried and failed to entice his idol over to them. He had the thought to get Krum's autograph for Ron, but then a more pressing question hit him.

"Hey, Krum," Draco said, cutting through all the sycophantic simpering the others were doing. Krum would spend the most time with Karkaroff as his prize pupil, so he was likely to know better than the others. "Your headmaster. Does he have a mark on his right palm?" Krum blinked at him, confused, and Draco went more secretive, drawing on his rudimentary German. "Karkaroff. Eine narbe." He held up his hand and drew a bent line over the palm where only he and Krum could see it. "Seine hand, eine narbe, ja? Nein?"

"Ja," Krum answered, bemused. "Yes, I speak English as vell. How you know of that?"

Draco shrugged, unconcerned, and turned back towards Ron, who was conveying even more murderous jealousy after Draco spoke to Krum. He considered, then did an elaborate impression of the Krum figure, when he had enchanted it to mack on Hermione. He could feel Krum staring at him like he was the strangest person he had ever met, but Draco was used to that by now.

The real highlight of Durmstrang and Beauxbatons' arrival was the foreign food that the house elves had made, namely the French food. Draco went and got Luna after dinner was

over, intending to go down to the kitchens to compliment Dobby on the bouillabaisse, but he was stopped dead by the sight of Karkaroff near the door. His gloves still on, he had stopped before one of the students, but not Draco: Potter.

Some foolish instinct sent Draco pushing forward, irrationally afraid Karkaroff would pull something against Potter. Crouch got there first, though, and did the work of menacing Karkaroff out of the way. It was a good job he was doing with the act, for the most part. For the first time, Draco could see the use of the imposter, though Severus could have done the job just as well. Draco might even have been induced to ask Karkaroff to take off his gloves, and see what happened.

The trouble with going to save Potter was that Potter noticed his existence after that, and Draco was forced to admit his and Luna's intentions. She didn't mind Potter and the others tagging along, though. Maybe it made the other house elves aghast, for Dobby to settle down and play wizard's chess against Ron, with Draco taking bets, on a match whose outcome for once he could not predict. But he could swear he caught a brother and sister pair sneaking glances and making guesses as they hurried past. Even if they seemed to be rooting for Ron, who triumphed in the end, after a healthy battle. It put a smile on all their faces, the night before the Goblet of Fire arrived.

At lunch, some of the other Slytherins told Draco they'd tried to wake him to go see the Goblet of Fire with them, but his charms had held. "Well, I see it now," Draco said with a yawn. "It's a goblet, there's fire, all seems to be in order. Alright, satisfied?"

"You missed the Weasley twins," Blaise laughed, "They tried to beat the Age Line and it went awfully," and though Draco had witnessed the first go-round, he let the other children tell him again. Blaise and Theo were both fair hands at telling a story.

The Slytherins also got to talking about the fact that it was Halloween. Draco was smug that he had the inside line, and was the only one correctly able to identify all of Hagrid's pumpkin carvings to his classmates. "That's a Hippogriff, Blaise," Draco said, "Sorry if that's triggering," and Blaise put on a brave face, while deliberately not looking at that particular pumpkin anymore.

"Halloween always seems to go terribly," Millie complained, looking well aware there were several broodingly handsome Durmstrang boys listening in on their conversation. "Last year, there was Sirius Black breaking into Gryffindor, and we all had to sleep overnight in the Great Hall..."

"The year before, the Chamber of Secrets was opened," Greg agreed. "'Enemies of the Heir Beware' written on the wall in blood, the caretaker's cat hung over it petrified. That's worse yet."

Draco heard one of the foreign students mutter something sardonic behind them in German, about how funny it was that *Durmstrang* was the school with the Dark Arts reputation. "Your school is very interesting," the other boy told Millie with a grimace.

"Oh, that's nothing compared to first year!" Daphne enthused, eager for her own share of attention. "With the troll! See, there was a troll let out in the dungeons, it nearly killed Harry

Potter, that has to have been the worst one..."

And those traitorous housemates of Draco's had to all stare right at Draco. "Vat?" one of the boys asked. "Vy are you all looking at that boy? Did the troll hurt him?" He looked confused as the Slytherins around him descended into hysterics. "Vat did I say?"

"No," Pansy said, shaking her head, "It's just that Draco could *handle* a troll. The rumor that went around was that *he* was the one who let the troll out into the dungeons, and he could control it with blood magicks. But," she hastily amended at his death glare, "That was all just rumors..."

"Come to think of it," Blaise drawled, "It *is* rather Draco's fault that Halloween has always been so lousy. Everyone thought he was the one who opened the Chamber of Secrets for so long..."

"But I wasn't! And Black was nothing to do with me!" Draco whined, but even Theo added,

"Well, Draco, Sirius Black happens to be your uncle, isn't he?"

After that, three different Durmstrang students leaned over, asking whether Draco was going to enter the tournament, upon which Draco had to remind them all he was only a fourth-year. He finally snapped for the whole table to hear, "I'm not going to be unleashing any trolls or Basilisks or fugitives from Azkaban onto the Triwizard Tournament, alright! You can tell Karkaroff that!"

"Hmm," Vince said, "But then how will he ruin Halloween this year? It's *tradition*."

"Give him time," Theo said confidently. "I'm sure he'll think of something."

Halloween was poised to be unpleasant, but he didn't see how they would get around to blaming it on him, unless they thought he helped Potter beat the age line. He contemplated warning Potter in some manner, but he couldn't think of any way that wouldn't make him just look guilty.

And left alone, it all unfolded the same. The Goblet of Fire was in its place in all its defective glory at the front of the high table, and Draco seemed the only one to have enjoyed the Halloween feast, with everyone else waiting on bated breath to hear the champions announced. He obligingly applauded when the blue tongue of flame spat out the name Viktor Krum, although it felt wrong now for him and Karkaroff to applaud for the same thing. "Bravo, Viktor!" Karkaroff called. "Knew you had it in you!" And Draco knew it was probably unfair, but that booming show of nauseating paternal pride made Draco disinclined to cede his best friend as a ball date to that strutting star.

Then it was Fleur Delacour, and then Cedric Diggory, and Draco applauded for them too, with at least some of the enthusiasm his housemates would expect from him for his supposed crush Diggory. He caught Potter glaring over in his direction, and stuck his tongue out at him

before looking back at the goblet, the only one in the hall who knew to be expecting another name.

How *had* Crouch gotten the name in? Unless it had been Karkaroff, coerced somehow, or who else? Wormtail on an unexpectedly intrepid return mission to Hogwarts, speeding in a Potter slip with it tied to his rat tail? There was no telling, and Draco hadn't elected to try and prevent it. One had to presume that whoever did it- read, most likely Crouch- also was the one to have enchanted the cup as a Portkey- which might count Karkaroff out, actually, given his drive to make Krum win, unless the man just really secretly hated Krum- understandable-

"Excellent!" Dumbledore began, as Draco waited for him to be interrupted. "Well, we now have our three champions. I am sure I can count upon all of you, including the remaining students from Beauxbatons and Durmstrang, to give your champions every ounce of support you can muster. By cheering your champion on, you will contribute in a very real-"

Except the Goblet was all red and sparkly again, as if it was very proud of itself for its incompetence. *You had one job, you glorified old wine cup. One bloody job.* Dumbledore's hand was there to take the parchment when it exploded, which almost made Draco suspicious *Dumbledore* could have planted it- some ill-conceived training for Potter, perhaps- but maybe it was just habit. And he did look genuinely distressed to see the name he did. Draco had experience to know what genuine distress looked like on Albus Dumbledore.

"Harry Potter."

Draco almost applauded, before realizing that no one else was. He tried to catch Potter's gaze, and found him sitting as petrified as if it had been a Basilisk to look down from that table, not just a disappointed headmaster.

Poor Potter. Draco had really thought he put it in the first time. He'd been so bitter, having fantasized about being chosen himself, and would have put his own name in if he'd been able to think of a way. Seeing Potter get the spot had made him feel vindicated in all his worst beliefs about Potter being a fame-hungry, arrogant egomaniac. He must have looked at Potter just like this in the blue line. But he didn't know how, even then, he could have missed the utter shock and despair in Potter's perfect green eyes.

After a long pause, Dumbledore called Potter up again, and Hermione pushed him on. As Potter walked through the lines of tables, for once, he didn't look over at Slytherin a single time.

The feast was pretty much over then, with the other Slytherins generally agreeing that Draco was four for four in ruining Halloween, since it was Draco's friend Potter to have caused the trouble this time. Draco didn't bother to disabuse them, just went over to Gryffindor, ignoring house boundaries for once and sitting beside a distressed Hermione, putting an arm around her.

"Oh, Draco," Hermione gasped, "Who could have done this? Who could have put him in?"

"I don't know," a dark voice came from her other side. "Him?"

Somehow, impossibly, the voice was Ron's, and the person he was pointing at was Draco.

"Um," Draco said, wrinkling his nose and frowning, "No?"

"You're more than good enough with the dark arts to fool it!" Ron exclaimed.

"What the actual hell, Cannon?" Draco complained. "Oh, yes, you've uncovered my cunning plan. All these years putting up with Gryffindors were just a dastardly long con to worm my way in, only to force him into the tournament and get the Boy Who Lived killed-"

"Not force him, *Frankenstein,*" Ron snapped, "He would have asked you, wouldn't he? And you'd have bloody well done it for him, because you probably *fancy*-"

"Ron," Draco said, "You might want to think about how you finish that sentence. Because while casting Langlock on you in front of the entire Great Hall wasn't in my Halloween night plans, I would generally characterize them as *flexible*."

"Forget it! Be on his side! Forget both of you!" Ron yelled, and stomped from the Great Hall, leaving Hermione and Draco to stare after him.

"What?" Draco asked blankly. "Are there sides, Striker? Why are there sides?"

"I'll go talk to him," Hermione sighed, and held out her bracelet for him to flick the H charm reassuringly. "Don't worry, Draco. He's just being an idiot boy. He'll come to his senses, and the professors obviously won't let Harry *actually* compete. Everything will get sorted out fine."

Except nothing was sorted the way she had predicted. The next morning came with the news that Potter was officially one of not three but four champions, as Draco remembered, and the sight of Ron sitting at breakfast alone, which he hadn't happened to remember.

Had suspicion of Draco backing an illicit entry attempt on Potter's part driven them apart this time? And Potter didn't appear at breakfast at all, and neither did Hermione, except for a brief moment where she walked up to the Gryffindor table, seemed to exchange heated words with Ron, and marched away again. Draco caught Luna's gaze, jerked his head, and they followed her.

They found Potter and Hermione seated together in front of the lake, much the same place where Potter had taken Draco and upset Crouch, only now there was the great empty hulk of the Durmstrang ship to mar the view. "Isn't it obvious?" they heard Hermione sighing. "He's jealous!"

"Jealous of what?" Potter said incredulously, "Jealous of what? He wants to make a prat of himself in front of the whole school, does he-"

"I did try to tell you that once, Potter," Draco drawled, "If you recall," and he and Luna settled themselves down with the pair as if they had been invited. In retrospect, his words might seem excessively prescient, but he hadn't actually known Ron would throw such a

jealous snit over Potter being chosen. He didn't know if Ron had last time, or if this was all his fault. He had just spent enough years hanging around Ron to notice.

"I'm trying to explain to Harry," Hermione sighed, "Why Ron doesn't believe that Harry didn't enter himself in the tournament," and Potter looked over and went stiff at the sight of Draco.

"*You* don't believe I did it, do you?" Potter asked warily, and Draco shook his head hard.

"Don't be daft, Potter," Draco said impatiently, "I know you hate the spotlight. And you spend enough time trying to avoid being killed to voluntarily sign up for more. Luna, you believe him too, don't you?"

Luna eyed Potter thoughtfully. "I don't know," she said. "Why is Ron so convinced, then?"

"Because he wishes it was him," Hermione explained, "And he needs someone to blame-"

"Maybe he needs to grow up, then!" Potter yelled, with more animosity in his voice towards Ron than Draco had ever heard him use. He might have thought these signs of cracks in the perfect trio would gratify him, but they made him uncomfortable instead. It was just wrong, like witnessing Potter and Ron snub Hermione in first year. The three of them belonged together, Potter the famous warrior, Hermione the brilliant mind, and Ron- well, Ron was there too...

"Maybe he'll believe I'm not enjoying myself once I've got my neck broken or-"

"Don't say things like that," Luna said calmly, "You could jinx yourself," and Potter just rubbed at his scar, scowling.

"I talked with Sirius last night," Potter said, "Through the mirror. He believed me. And he didn't like the look of it. Thinks it's suspicious. Dangerous for me." He did a double-take at Draco. "You wouldn't have entered me without telling me, would you?" Draco shook his head. "Really?"

Luna frowned. "If you don't believe Draco when he says he didn't enter you, why do you expect Ron to believe you?" Potter wilted, and Hermione patted him on the back, as he sagged down and buried his head in his hands. "Harry, I'll tell you what I need to know to believe you."

"What?" Potter asked eagerly. "What is it? Do you think it would work on Ron?"

Luna considered. "We'll need some tea."

She was happy to be the one to race back to the kitchens, and came back with Dobby and a full tea set and table for them. Dobby hardly made matters better by his fervent congratulations to Harry Potter for being chosen, and earnest wishes that Harry Potter be victorious.

"We think someone's entered him to get him hurt," Hermione explained. "Out to get him."

Dobby glared around them fiercely. "Then Dobby will protect Harry Potter!" He deflated right after, though. "If only Dobby knew who he was to be protecting Harry Potter *from*..."

"Ron, for the moment," Draco said dryly, and dodged a half-hearted whack from Hermione.

Luna had apparently taken to her Divination classes, because it turned out tasseography was her chosen method for determining Potter's innocence or guilt. "Seriously?" Potter groaned. "When we did this in class last year, Trelawney took one look in my cup and saw death."

"You mean the Grim?" Draco asked. "Death is the Grim in tea reading, right?"

"Well, Sirius is rather like a Grim as an Animagus," Luna said calmly, "Sounds accurate to me," much to Hermione's scoffing. Luna just urged Potter to hurry up and drink his tea. Draco chugged down his own orange Earl Grey with enthusiasm, and made sure to smudge and dump his own grounds so no one could try and read those. He had to shudder remembering the alligator.

None of them could make out any shapes in Potter's cup, not even Luna. She insisted that they not move it from its initial position, and kept turning her head to try and figure it out. But it took Dobby to let out a sudden shriek and clasp his hands to his face. "A tower!"

When Draco tilted his head Dobby's way, he thought he could at least make out the long straight shape of a tower rising from a solid base of grounds at the bottom, if not the individual turrets and even windows that Dobby's webbed fingers meticulously pointed out. The tower was directly pointing in Draco's direction.

"The tower is never good," Luna mused. "Like the tarot card. In tea leaf reading... misfortune, disappointment. And the tower begins in the past... you've already been disappointed... and it goes all the way to the top, disappointment in the present... disappointment in the future..."

"Well, the good news, Potter," Draco said dryly, "Is that the leaves point to your innocence. The bad news is, if the leaves are to be believed, you're going to keep being very, very disappointed."

Potter made a face and began to anxiously question Luna about his cup's meaning, abandoning his disbelief rather quickly, to Hermione's dismay. Luna indeed did seem to believe him now, and also was convinced that the layout of the tower predicted near-perpetual disappointment.

"Well, that's nice," Potter said glumly, and Draco bit his lip and smirked at him. That put a light in Potter's eyes. They flashed back at Draco, coming to life in the sunlight, before Luna began musing on all the ways a person could be disappointed, and then Potter was nothing but glum again.

"Dobby," Draco whispered, pulling him aside, "Did you really decipher it like that? Or are you just trying to help Potter?"

"Dobby would not lie. Dobby is very sorry for Harry Potter. But there is a tower in the cup."

So three-fourths of the school hated Potter now, as opposed to one-fourth. That preexisting one had already been Slytherin. And it wasn't like Draco could do much about his housemates, despite Hermione's increasingly less subtle hints. She was just lucky he wasn't there riling up people worse against Potter like in the blue loop, though in retrospect, he should have been able to think of something better than *Potter Stinks* badges. At least Hagrid believed Potter, bless his heart, and so did Dumbledore.

Of course *Dumbledore* did. Draco wasn't abandoning his new suspicion Dumbledore was behind it all, though he knew better than to voice it to Gryffindors.

What *was* frustrating was the persistent belief of Draco's housemates that he personally had been the one to help Potter break the age line and enter it. They all had spent enough time in classes with Potter to be convinced he could never have done it on his own, and Theo's judgment that Draco had to be guilty was one all their year respected. Draco could have protested that Hermione was smarter than him, and could have done it just as well, but caring about a goddamn friendship made it impossible to throw her name out. As it was, he earned himself some increased enmity from his table, particularly a sour-faced Viktor Krum, who after that sat deliberately as far at the Slytherin table from the fourth-years as he could.

The belief in Potter's guilt, possibly with Draco's help, wouldn't have been even noteworthy to him, should Ron not have also persisted in it. Even though he had far less reason than he'd had to persist thinking Draco the Heir of Slytherin in second year. Ron's lack of faith seemed what made Potter the most miserable. "I could cope with the rest of the school if I could just have Ron back. But I'm not going to try and persuade Ron to talk to me if he doesn't want to..."

Hermione found this attitude backward, and was not shy in saying so. She attributed Potter's moping mental state to his purported difficulty at summoning charms in Flitwick's class, one that alarmed Draco far more than her, given how vital Draco knew the summoning charm would be to Potter in the First Task. "You've been able to do summoning charms since first year," Hermione sighed. "Do you think you could give him some extra help?"

But Draco didn't think Potter would get better at focusing on anything until the root cause could be addressed. Potter seemed ready to wait for Ron to calm down, as these Gryffindors were far more tempestuous towards each other than Draco could have imagined from the outside. He still remembered the fall-out last year between Hermione and the boys over the Firebolt and the Scabbers-Crookshanks situation, but reminding Ron of the foolishness of that just tended to make him angrier, Scabbers turning out to be a mass murderer notwithstanding.

Ron just got madder at Draco when he and everyone else saw him continually intervening in Potions to try and draw Severus's attention away from tormenting Potter. Normally Draco would just sit by and let it go. Let Severus have his fun, he deserved it. But it was hard enough for Potter with his brewing partner not speaking to him. Both of them were liable to melt their cauldron at any moment without Draco keeping a sharp watch on them.

Severus made increasingly transparent hints that Potter would be the one they'd test their antidotes on. Draco kept making corresponding attempts to volunteer to be the one to take the poison instead, knowing Severus would never let him be seriously poisoned.

Severus and Ron just got angrier when Potter was pulled out of class by Creevey to go have his picture taken with the other champions. Ron refused to speak to him in the library that day, calling his behavior in Potions proof that Draco had been Potter's accomplice. When Potter came into the library to join them, Ron stomped away from their table entirely. Draco rolled his eyes and followed him, ignoring Potter's pleading stare. He even plopped down at the last place any sane person with an ounce of self-respect or self-preservation instincts would have planted himself- a study table with Neville Longbottom.

"When are you going to get over it and stop being a pillock, Ron?" Draco demanded, and saw Ron's hand go to his wand pocket. "Seriously?" Neville was squeaking and looking between them nervously, but Draco ignored his discomfort, genuinely irritated now. "Are you going to be like this when we go flying tomorrow night?"

"When *we* go flying?" Ron snapped, and earned Madam Pince's glare. "Why would I want to go flying with *you*? At best, you're buying Harry's lies, and at worst, you're covering for him because you helped him!"

Draco took a deep breath, telling himself that Ron did not have the blue loop to draw upon as a resource like he did. As a real fourteen-year-old, Draco had entertained far worse delusions about Potter, and been crueler to Potter than Ron could ever dream of. "Are you coming or what? We didn't get to go last week. Come on, flying is our thing. It's fun. You can blow off some steam. We can run whatever Quidditch drills you want-"

"Maybe I'll show up," Ron snapped, "If I feel like it," and slammed his book shut, threw it into his bag hard enough to make them all smash together, and stomped out of the library before Madam Pince could come over to throw him out.

It seemed it would take something big to get Ron back on side, but luckily enough, Draco was someone who specialized in *something big*.

He had the opportunity at dinner that night, if Krum hadn't sat too far off to speak to, but Draco was undeterred. He followed Krum in his knot of Durmstrang boys up the marble staircases, and waited for there to be no Hogwarts students in their vicinity, before he called out, "Krum! Stop!" Krum and the boys turned, looking perturbed, so Draco just sneered at them. "Yeah, don't try and pretend you don't know who I am. Krum, a word."

Krum looked so nonplused that either he seriously bought into the conspiracy theory that Draco helped Potter sneak into the tournament, or Karkaroff must have said something. "Vat is it?"

"Alone," Draco said, and there was a combination of titters and worried murmurs from the Durmstrang boys, more schoolboyish than he would have expected from seventeen and eighteen-year-olds. "What?" Draco snapped, crossing his arms and refusing to be intimidated.

"They have heard," Krum said, seeming to speak with care not to offend Draco, "That your interest is in boys. And that you are a dark vizard. Like a young Grindelvald. So they are afraid you vill try to kiss or kill me."

Draco gave the Severus eye-roll. "No danger of either. I'm out of your league, Krum. In *every* sense. But you'd better come speak to me when I ask, or I might make an exception about my usual policy against cursing *children*. What, are you scared of me?"

Krum didn't look exactly pleased for a fourth-year to be calling him and his classmates children, but he couldn't let the suggestion he was scared stand. He followed Draco into the trophy room, which seemed to make him curious, ducking his head to inspect various inscriptions.

"Hey!" Draco snapped. "Eyes over here! Listen, Krum..." Now that he had him here, he didn't exactly know how to put it. If Krum had seemed to have developed a thing for Hermione already, Draco could have used his pull with her for leverage. But he hadn't seen them anywhere near each other yet. "I need a favor."

"And this is how you go about asking it?" Krum asked, crossing his arms defensively. He did seem at least intimidated by the overblown stories he would have heard of Draco.

Draco shrugged elegantly. "I'm not the sort to follow you around like a squealing fanboy, Krum. It's a favor for you as well. I have permission to go out at nights to the Quidditch pitch and go flying on Saturdays, as late as I want. I want you to come join me tomorrow night."

Krum could not have looked more baffled. "Vy? Because I am famous at Quidditch?"

Well, yes, but Draco didn't know if explaining Ron's obsession with him would incline the boy more towards showing up. "No," Draco said, shifting impatiently. "Because I'm a Seeker too, and we don't have Quidditch this year thanks to your bullshit tournament, so I need the practice."

At least Krum did not seem insulted by the presumption of a schoolboy wanting to practice with a World Cup finalist, but he looked dismayed by the invitation nonetheless. "Headmaster Karkaroff told me you vould do this," he said gloomily. "That you vould pretend to be friendly, and lure me to somevere isolated, and then you vould curse me or vorse and not be caught."

Draco closed his eyes and rubbed them hard. "Listen, just because me and my family have history with your headmaster doesn't mean he knows everything. There's more than one person he fucked over at the end of the war, you know." Krum's eyes focused on him truly for the first time, and Draco sprung on the first straw he could find. "Tell you what, Krum. You come flying with me tomorrow night, and I'll answer any question you have about that man. All the dirt on your headmaster's past you could ever want. All the things he wouldn't want you to know. Deal?"

Krum looked troubled but tempted, and didn't take too long to give into that temptation. "Alright. I vill come. I vill fly with you, Malfoy. But you *vill* keep your end of the bargain. I do not trust you, young Grindelvald."

The Room of Requirement

Chapter Notes

Playlist

Draco was smug all day after he got Krum to agree to come. Even after Ron walked past him and Hermione at football, and he responded to Draco's unusual invitation to join them with a rather rude gesture, Draco had faith in his scheme. He confined himself to strolling past the Gryffindor table and, ignoring Potter's jealous stare, drawling into Ron's ear, "You're showing up for flying tonight, right? You'd better."

"Maybe," Ron muttered, devoting more attention to his mashed potatoes.

"I'm serious," Draco said excitedly, "You'll regret it if you don't, Ron, I've got a surprise for you. One you'll like. *Really* like. For real, it's gonna blow your mind."

Ron made a noncommittal noise, but Draco considered him sufficiently enticed.

Yet things went downhill very quickly from there. Draco was in the Slytherin common room, being trounced at wizard's chess by Theo, when a shocked and impressed Blaise came and informed him *Viktor Krum* was at the dungeon entrance waiting for him. Draco sighed in exasperation, ignoring the jealous stares he was getting, and wondered why he had used to put so much stock in celebrity. You would think a year being taught by Lockhart would have gotten him out of the habit.

"Traded in Weasley for a better model?" Theo said, unimpressed.

"This is *for* Ron," Draco said loftily. "He's a huge fan. But I wouldn't expect *you* to understand going out of one's way for a friend."

Theo shrugged comfortably, snagging Blaise to take Draco's place to finish their game. Blaise did not look thrilled at the position in which he found his new pieces.

"All friendships," Theo said mildly, "Are inherently contingent."

"Seriously, Krum?" Draco complained as soon as he opened the Slytherin entrance. "It's only 11!"

Krum blinked. "You did not give the specific time."

Draco groaned. "Okay, fine, whatever. You'll just have to wait a second, I need to change. Just hang out and chill or whatever." And so it was that Draco left a World Cup finalist to *hang out and chill or whatever* as he went into his dorm and changed to his Quidditch robes,

like he always did for flying nights. This time, though, not just his year but several others followed him to see, and the emerald-green robes left no doubt to them what they were doing.

It was annoying. Draco didn't know how much his carefully crafted tough dark wizard mystique would crack under the knowledge he hung out playing Quidditch with celebrities. Bad enough everyone already thought he'd rescued half the population of Beauxbatons before strolling up and casting the Dark Mark.

"Ah," Krum said, nodding as they walked out, "This is your uniform for Slytherin. You are their Seeker. Do you vant to become professional someday?"

"I'm not *that* good," Draco said dismissively, "But even if I was, I have other plans. I'm going to be an Unspeakable."

Krum had no idea what an Unspeakable was, nor could Draco's explanation assist him easily in wrapping his mind around it, even when Draco tried different parts in German. It didn't seem a language barrier so much as the general mystery around what Unspeakables were. The Bulgarian Ministry didn't have the equivalent. The mention of that ministry, though, meant Draco couldn't resist telling the story about the minister feigning not to speak English, and making Fudge mime everything all day before revealing his English. His impression of Fudge's consternation made Viktor laugh very loudly before they reached the pitch.

"Yeah, I know, Mr. World Cup finalist, it's a dump," Draco said, and Viktor shook his head.

"At Durmstrang, it is cold much more of the year. Ve vould not be able to do this without much heavier robes in November." Viktor went over to the Hogwarts broomshed, where apparently he had been keeping his own Firebolt, and looked at least respectful of Draco's Nimbus 2001. Clearly, he'd been practicing out here sometimes as well, with Karkaroff's assistance no doubt.

"Okay," Draco said, stalling, "Why don't you tell me more about the Durmstrang grounds," and walked out of the shed looking around for a flash of ginger hair.

"Come on," Krum said impatiently, "I vant to play," and rocketed up into the sky.

He led Draco around the pitch in a standard series of warm-ups from his club team that had Draco tired and regretting all his life choices even before they got started. He kept glancing around for Ron, with his watch telling him Ron was definitely late by now, but he clung onto hope Ron was coming, even as Krum began to demand throwing drills, and he had to show off to a professional just how weak his throwing arm really was.

"You play Quidditch for your house?" Krum asked doubtfully, after the Quaffle fell short from Draco's throw and he had to dive for it, a large blur of exact descent like a great eagle swooping down. "You cannot throw for shit. And you do not seem very enthusiastic..."

Draco's pride was incensed then, even though his real goal was throwing Ron a bone to affect reconciliation, with a bonus of time to evaluate Krum one-on-one for prospective worthiness of dating Hermione. "I told you, I'm a Seeker. That's where all my skills lie. This isn't total football, I'm not *Cruyffian*." Dean had told Draco that Krum seemed to know some about

Muggle football in interviews, but he was still surprised how much the boy's eyes lit up at the reference.

"You like football?" he asked, flying closer and lowering his voice like it was a dirty secret he even knew what it was. "But you are a pureblood, ja?" Draco nodded. "And you are not ashamed?"

Draco shrugged elegantly. "If I wasted time being *ashamed,* Krum, there's so much people think is shameful about me, I'd just be embarrassed and cringing all the time. Football is based off Quidditch, I love Quidditch, it just surprises me more wizards aren't into football." Krum was still looking dubious, as if he suspected this was some trick on Draco's fault to feign shared interests with him. "No, seriously, I went to the Muggle World Cup final this year, not just the wizard one you were in. My best friend's Muggleborn, we went with her parents to the States."

"I vanted to go," Krum said gloomily, "But I had to train for our World Cup. And if I vere seen near Muggle sports, Headmaster Karkaroff vould kill me." Then he seemed to perk up slightly. "Your friend... this is Harry Potter's friend? Herm-own-ninny?"

Sweet Salazar, the man had noticed her already? Didn't waste any time in Bulgaria, it seemed. "Yeah, *Hermione*. I know it's a tough name, but if you want her to like you, you might want to work hard and try and pronounce it right. She and I play football with some Gryffindors every weekend. My nickname for her is Striker, she's got a wicked shot on her."

And from the dopey look on the boy's face, Draco seemed to have rendered Krum instantly in love with her. "Striker?" he echoed, looking enamored, and then cleared his throat. "Herm-own-ninny," he tried, and Draco shook his head. It took about three dozen tries and corrections, but finally, Krum slowly pronounced some respectable semblance of *Hermione*.

"Yeah, you can work on that," Draco said, and yawned and stretched. "Well, it's getting late, might as well head back inside, huh?" He was getting the incredibly embittering feeling that if Ron wasn't here by now, he wouldn't be come, and Draco had stuck his neck out like this for nothing.

"Vat?" Krum looked baffled yet again by him. "But you said all your skill is as Seeker. I vant to see you play, Malfoy. Ve must have das Gedränge, ja?"

Unfortunately, Draco's Quidditch-related German was one of his few good areas in the language, due to a childhood spent half-following the German Quidditch Bundesliga. He knew that meant scrimmage, and so it did, as Krum proved rather excited for the chance to have even the slightest competitive play again. They released the Snitch three times, waited, and both searched for it, a Seeker one-on-one, and Krum wanted to play best of three. He won the first time rather easily, so much that Draco's pride was piqued. Krum had spotted the Snitch and nearly finished his dive before Draco so much as noticed him diving.

Draco's pride always got him in trouble, but he couldn't help it. He remembered the hoop feint he had pulled on Terence Higgs during tryouts in second year, and how subsequently it had never worked on anyone, especially Potter. But that was anyone at *Hogwarts,* Krum would have never heard about it...

It was more in the acting of it than anything to sell it, as the end of the countdown had Draco flying at top speed immediately towards one set of the hoops, hurtling as if his life depended on it. Krum had been the one to execute the Wronski Feint in the cup final, but he was at least caught enough by Draco's pretense to zoom after him, nearly overtaking him. Draco stuck out his hand, training his eyes desperately on one spot behind the topmost hoop as if the Snitch was obvious there, and Krum fell for it-

Draco had to execute a complicated roll and swerve to avoid crashing, but it worked. Krum went slamming into the hoop face-first and just barely managed to keep hold of his broom to fly himself dazed to the ground, where he fell on his back looking half-unconscious. The Snitch was obliging enough then to show itself glittering near the ground, and Draco could swoop down in a leisurely fashion and snatch it up. He sauntered over to Krum and held it up over him. "Guess that's 1-1, huh?" The Bulgarian's nose was broken, much as in the cup final, and he looked dazed. "Unless you need to resign, you know, from injury, I'll just count this set as my victory..."

"Vat vas that?" Krum breathed, pulling himself up. "No, I am not out. Ve vill play third."

And Krum won the third match, of course, even with blood still streaming down his face, but they were neck-in-neck on the dive this time. Draco counted it as a victory, especially since he came off with his pristine Slytherin-green robes still unsullied. "Vere did you learn that feint?" he kept asking as Draco helped him hold back his nose and stop the bleeding, before they headed back towards the castle. He didn't believe Draco when he said he'd made it up, though at least he didn't seem to think, as Draco might have feared in retrospect, that the feint had constituted the inevitable murder attempt Karkaroff had counseled Krum to expect from him.

And Draco had hoped Krum would forget about Draco's promise to tell him about the man, but Krum stopped him before they reached the entrance hall, and sat him down on the steps of Hogwarts to interrogate. "Now it is your turn," he said in a drawn nasally tone, with no seeming care or even feel of the pain in his nose. "How did you know of the mark on Karkaroff's hand?"

Draco sighed, casting Focillo on himself and then Krum. "Accio pillow," he cast, envisioning purple pillows from the little visiting area Dobby had made him nearby down in the kitchens, and soon one came racing out. After a moment, he summoned Krum one too, not to be a jackass. "He might tell you the truth himself, so there's no reason to lie. I gave it to him. Or my wand did, that is," he said, and took out the talon wand and showed it to Krum in the moonlight. "It was his own fault," he added at Krum's dark look. "He's the one who disarmed me and grabbed it. My wand only reacts like that when it's someone hostile trying to steal it. He tried to use Crucio on me after."

Krum looked more surprised by the wand's abilities than hearing his headmaster had attempted an Unforgivable curse on a fourteen-year-old. "That is very powerful magic, Malfoy."

"'Stolen power'," Draco muttered to himself, and forced a dismissive smile when Krum looked quizzical. "He came to visit my father this summer, I don't know why. But he was worried I was going to try and enter the tournament, even though I'm underage. I guess he

felt threatened. He got all in my face, and I didn't react well. He hates me now, and that brand is not ever going away." Krum let out a low whistle. "You know Karkaroff was a Death Eater, right?"

"There is talk around Durmstrang, always," Viktor said slowly. "That Karkaroff vas a dark vizard and did terrible things in England. But no one knows anything for sure, and if ve are caught talking of it, ve are beaten. And Karkaroff has always been kind to me, though not my classmates."

"Well, he was a Death Eater," Draco said, playing with the talon wand between his index and thumb. "Convicted, it's not just rumors. Our Defense teacher, Moody- you know, the one with the staff and the crazy eye- he's the one who caught him and took him down. See, I do have interesting information, Krum. Worth a bloody nose?" Krum nodded, with a look like he'd rather enjoyed the bloody nose. "If you tell Karkaroff I told you this he'd probably attempt my life- even though half of Slytherin could have told you the same- but anyway, Karkaroff was dead to rights, until he rolled on a lot of his friends and started giving our courts names. Lots of names. Including Barty Crouch's son." *You might have noticed him at Hogwarts. Haggard old fellow with the wandering eyeball.* "You know, Crouch, he's helping run the tournament? This is a small incestuous magical community in its way, Britain. So many old ties and grudges, it's like a Flagrante curse. Touch anywhere and your hands come away scalded."

Krum stared down at his bloodied hands, brooding and troubled. "Is the headmaster safe coming back to this place, then?"

Draco snorted. "Have you been listening? The question is, is Hogwarts safe from *him*?"

It went around the school that Draco and a bruised-faced Krum had been out playing Quidditch together last night. That seemed to make precisely no one happy, especially Karkaroff, glaring down from the high table. Potter was also immediately jealous, of course, being Potter, who always wanted to be the best Seeker in town. Luna thought Draco should be more careful about injuring famous people, with what they'd say about him. Hermione thought it a flashy waste of time. And Ron? Ron seemed to somehow think Draco had left him out on purpose. "You knew I wasn't coming, so you invited him to spite me!"

Draco regretted pulling Ron aside after lunch. The Transfiguration courtyard was such a lamentably public location for casting Unforgivables. "Bloody hell, Ron, how bad is your damn inferiority complex? You ungrateful git, did you not hear me telling you to come last night, over and over? I did it *for* you, as an olive branch! I got your idol to come to fly with you! You're the one who didn't even show! Do you have any idea what I had to do to get *him* to show up?"

"What, did you bribe him or something?" Ron sneered. "You have more than enough money, don't you? Or would he just do anything a Malfoy told him? Well, enjoy flying with your new famous friend. You like them famous, don't you- you and him and Harry can just go on being famous and awful together-"

"WHAT IS WRONG WITH YOU?" Draco yelled, so loud Ron looked around nervously to make sure no one would hear. "POTTER DID NOT PUT HIS NAME IN!"

"Right," Ron said slowly, "Because *you* did-"

"How many times do I have to tell you," Draco pleaded, "You're my friend, Ron, I would have told you, he would have told you- he didn't do it! You're just being stubborn by now! Friendships like you and Potter's should be unconditional anyway! Not, like, inherently contingent! You're his best mate, he misses you loads-"

"Just because you *fancy* him-"

"Okay, that is *it*!" Draco exclaimed, and his hand went to his pocket. Ron jumped back, eyes widening, but Draco was just feeling at the bent shape, to try and give him some semblance of calm before he exploded. "You know what? If you won't listen any other way, I'll just have to beat it into of you, won't I?" Ron looked dubious at Draco's capability at that, so Draco specified, "At a wizard's duel, Ron. What?" he laughed, when Ron went pale as a ghost. "Isn't that your lot's thing? You and Potter challenged me to one in first year, if you've forgotten. What, are you scared?"

"No!" Ron said in a strangled tone. He'd never looked so terrified by anything not hairy and on six legs. "Of course I'm not *scared*, I just think it's stupid, we're not first-years anymore-"

"It's stupid," Draco goaded, hands gone to fists at his side, "Because you know you'll lose?"

Ron's eyes flashed, Gryffindor courage surging up and serving him predictably ill. "Fine! Hope you're ready to get destroyed! I'll pulverize you!"

"I look forward to it," Draco drawled. "Tonight, right after dinner. Don't forget to bring a second, you'll likely need one."

"You don't use a second, though," Ron said, and Draco just smirked. "What? Who are you gonna ask? Harry? Hermione? Nott?" Draco kept smirking mysteriously, and Ron's eyes widened in horror. "*Professor Snape*?"

"Wait and see," Draco said, and then said one of the stupidest things on impulse he'd ever said. "Meet me with your second on the seventh floor. Right by the tapestry of Barnabas the Barmy. And don't even tell Hermione or Potter, they'd try to put a stop to it. Got it?"

"Got it," Ron said, with a look like he'd just signed his own death warrant.

Draco might very well lose. His mind had gone to the one place he was almost sure they wouldn't be caught, and forgotten he hadn't stepped foot in it since first year. That had been a major panic attack, which marked it as avoid-at-all-costs thereafter.

But he couldn't show any weakness to this blockhead blowhard, so he climbed the steps by himself nonetheless, walked past the entrance three times thinking, *I need a safe place to duel, nothing in it but barriers to protect our seconds*, and the door opened.

Maybe it helped that the room he'd requested was so different from the rubbish-filled, cavernous place he remembered. Maybe there was all that clutter somewhere, behind the small cube of black obsidian-like stone, with its large case like a cupboard of clear glass, but he couldn't see it. For whatever reason, maybe the calming draught accumulated in Draco's veins, he found himself unafraid to step in and survey it. If it had looked a thing like the room for the Vanishing cabinet or Fiendfyre, that would have been another thing entirely.

"Lacarnum inflamari," Draco tested. The fireball soared into one of the walls and singed it, but was absorbed well enough. Satisfied in his choice of venue after all, he went to find his second.

He managed to avoid Hermione spotting him in the library, hustling Luna out to the hallway. He pulled her safely around several corners and cast a Muffliato, before leaning in and hissing, "I'm going to have a wizard's duel tonight, a formal one, and I need you to be my second."

"Okay," said Luna, and the persuasion Draco had readied fell from his lips.

"That's it?" Draco asked. "Just 'okay'? I haven't even told you who I'll be dueling or why!"

Luna shrugged. "You're my cousin, aren't you? If you're in danger, I'll help you."

Draco barely resisted the urge to hug her. Then she extended her own arms for a hug, and he let himself oblige. Any lingering unease about the Room of Requirement seemed to melt in the presence of her gentle, otherworldly calm. "Thank you, Luna, thank you. I knew I could count on you." He snorted after a moment. "I'm not in danger, though. The duel's against Ron."

"Oh, *no*!" Luna beamed like he'd told her tomorrow was Christmas come early. "You'll destroy him! Why are we dueling him?"

Draco considered. He was a little fuzzy on that himself. "Because he's a pillock?"

Luna nodded sagely. "I should have guessed."

She did as instructed, walking a circuitous path around the castle before heading to the seventh floor, but they were still the first to show up. "You don't think he's chickened out, do you?" she asked, sounding disappointed. She seemed to find this all very exciting.

Their opponents hardly seemed to be facing the contest with the same spirit. Draco had never seen a person less want to be somewhere than Neville Longbottom did right then, even himself. And Draco had once shared a home with *Fenrir Greyback*.

"Neville?" Draco marveled. "Your second is *Neville*?"

"Neville is great! He's perfect!" Ron enthused with false confidence. He wilted at the blissfully unperturbed look Luna was giving him, psyching him out. "And, um, Seamus, Dean, my brothers, Ginny, and both of the Patil twins said no." Quite a vote of confidence.

"I just want to say," Neville said, radiating abject terror, "That I never *really* thought you were the Heir of Slytherin in second year, Draco... really, I didn't..."

"It's nice to see you, Neville," Luna said brightly, and Neville buried his head in his hands.

"Let's get this show on the road," Draco drawled, and began the needed pacing. When the door opened for the Room of Requirement, Ron and Neville both jumped back as if he'd tried to cast Avada Kedavra on them. "Calm down. It's just a *room.* We can duel in here. Let's go."

The look of the sleek black walls, lit by no discernible light source, seemed only to terrify them further. "How are you going to beat Draco," they could all hear Neville fearfully whispering to Ron, "When he can conjure up a whole room at Hogwarts?"

Draco shook his head. "Neville," he called, "I didn't *make* this room, it's called the Room of Requirement, or the Room of Hidden Things, it's been here all along."

Ron shook his head. "It's not on Harry's map," he said with a shudder. He looked around, seeming convinced that Draco had powers they had never known.

Draco would have thought him irreparably brainless, if Luna hadn't chimed in then, "Oh, Draco, don't be modest, it's a lovely room you've made us."

"Didn't make it," Draco groaned. "Okay, Neville, Luna, get behind the glass, okay? You might want to hold onto something, or lean against the wall." Neville scrambled in, followed by a still-smiling Luna. She seemed to psych the Gryffindors out even more than Draco had already hoped. "Who's gonna count us down? Luna, you know how it goes, right?"

"Draco, why are we doing this?" Ron called fearfully. "How does this prove anything?"

"It proves," Draco said, "That I know I'm right, and I'll fight to prove it. I hung out with *Viktor Krum* for you, you think I'd scruple just to fight a duel for it?" Ron seemed stunned at Draco's ordering of those acts' unpleasantness. "Someone has to show you you're not always right!"

"Fine!" Ron yelled, and turned his back on Draco. "Just- a real duel! No dark magic! No Langlock! No conjuring snakes! None of that! Promise?"

"Promise," Draco drawled, and turned his back and took paces back, only for Ron to yelp,

"Wait, why is one of the walls scorched?"

"I was practicing. Luna, ready?"

"Take two paces back more each," her voice instructed. "Okay, three- two- one- go!"

Draco let Ron get the first shot. He didn't want this to be over before it started. He had a point to make. "Expelliarmus!" Ron yelled, and Draco already had his shield raised.

"Protego," he called lazily. Compared to how twenty adult Ministry wizards' spells had felt on his shield, Ron's first strike was nothing.

"Expulso!" Ron shouted, and an explosion rocketed off Draco's shield. Neville called out nervous encouragement, and Draco lost patience at the lack of challenge and flicked his wand.

"Everte statum," he said lazily, and Ron went flying backwards, crashing into the wall. Neville gasped, and Luna clapped enthusiastically. "There, have you had enough? Ready to yield?"

"Never!" Ron yelled, picking himself back up with a wince. "Expelli-"

"Aqua eructo!" Draco yelled, and watched the stream of water from his wand once more send Ron flying backwards into the wall, though he was very consciously keeping the strength of the spells almost as low as he could.

Ron surprised him, though, bellowing "Glacius!" to turn the water to ice. He used the ice to skate slipping forward and shoot a spell at Draco. "Expulso!" he yelled. The explosion was potent between them, blowing up a lot of the ice, and only just missing Draco as he dodged.

"Better!" Draco called happily, feeling more like a teacher with a pupil than anything.

"Expelliarmus, you condescending prick!" Ron shouted defiantly back, and Draco yelled Expelliarmus in return. The two streams of red light crashed together, and Neville gasped. Out of the corner of his eye, Draco could see Neville clinging in terror to a comforting Luna.

It was harder than Draco would have thought to overpower the raw force of Ron's magic then. Ron was putting everything into it, beads of sweat rolling down his wet face, shards of exploded ice melting all over him, and cast a surprisingly heroic figure, anticipating the boy he would be, fighting alongside Potter in the second war, in that disheveled young frame.

Draco felt a rush of fondness more than anything go through him. He tried not to be too harsh or wounding as he let his dam on the talon wand's power slip, and drove Ron's red light back to his body. Ron's wand sailed into Draco's waiting hand. Ron gasped and fell to his knees.

Draco went over and cast Focillo unasked on Ron's shivering frame. "That all decided, then?" he asked, offering Ron a hand. "Unless you plan to punch me like Potter did last time."

Ron just leaned back against the wall, winded beyond endurance. "Bloody hell. Bloody, *bloody* hell. Yeah, I'm done. Neville! Luna! You can come out. Bloody *hell*, Draco. You were right, weren't you? You didn't put Harry's name in the Goblet!"

Draco frowned. "And what led you to that sudden burst of uncharacteristic sense, Ron?"

"Because if you could enter someone," Ron panted, "You would have just entered yourself, because you know you'd *win*."

"Because he's good at dueling?" Neville asked wide-eyed, coming over to offer Ron a hand which he also ignored, content to stay prone in a heap on the ground.

"No," Ron said wearily, "Because he's so *confident*. Did you see him? He's in his element. What happened since first year, mate? When we went down that trapdoor. You just kept

screaming and freezing! But now... how'd you get so *calm*?"

Draco hadn't thought himself much improved. He didn't think he'd showed any more calm in the Chamber of Secrets, when he and Ron had hidden together, but maybe Ron thought he had. "I guess last year," Draco said slowly. "Last year was really hard, with-" He cast a glance at Neville, then leaned in to whisper down in Ron's ear. "With Uncle Sirius. Trying to help him. I got into some real duels, duels where I thought I actually could have been *killed*. Compared to that, this... I know *you'd* never hurt me, Ron, we both know that. We *are* friends, aren't we?"

"Yeah," Ron said, bleeding exhaustion from every pore, and finally accepted Draco's hand up. Neville helped support him on the other side as they made their slow wet way towards the exit. "Yeah, I know. I'm sorry, Draco. Listen- did Harry really do it? You're *sure* he didn't?"

"Draco's been sure from the start," Luna said earnestly, "So has Hermione, who's the smartest person I know. And I'm really sure too." Draco was thankful she didn't explain why.

Ron looked between them for a long moment, and then his face seemed to fall open, and he shook his head. "Bloody hell. I've been such a pillock, haven't I?"

"That's why we had to fight a duel against you," Luna said cheerfully.

When they stepped out of the Room of Requirement, though, they were not alone. Standing there waiting, looking almost as anxious as they were furious, were Potter and Hermione.

"Where have you been?" Hermione shrieked. "What did you do? What is that room? Oh my God, *Ron,* are you alright? Draco, how *could* you?" She and Potter both rushed to Ron's side, fussing over him and brushing off the remaining ice, not even noticing when Draco cast a Hot Air charm on Ron to dry out his robes some for him. "Ron, say something! Are you alright? Will you ever recover?"

Ron blinked at them in confusion. "Crikey, Hermione, calm down. What the hell?"

"We heard from Ginny that you two were going to have a *duel*," Hermione fretted, "So Harry got the map, and we tried to follow you on it after dinner, but then when you got to this hall you all just disappeared- oh, *Ron*, we thought something *awful* could have happened- some accident to *all* of you when you just stopped being on the map- Draco Lucius Malfoy, how *could* you-"

Draco hastily stepped back out of the line of fire behind Luna, which sent him near Potter. "Draco," Potter said grimly, "I never thought you were a bully, but-"

Ron seemed to resent the implications there. "Hey!" he called indignantly. "He wasn't being a *bully*! We had a duel, fair and square! And I didn't do too bad! I held my own for a while! I'm not some helpless child, I can defend myself-"

"Oh, yes, you *look* like you defended yourself admirably," Hermione snarked, sniffling a bit. She opened her mouth again, before a warning look from Draco made her close it.

"It's true," said Neville. "He did so good. I thought he was just going to be dead in seconds."

"Neville!" Ron yelled, and Neville had to flee as a still-wet and cold Ron tried to wallop him.

Eventually, the situation calmed, and they walked Ron back to Gryffindor to get truly dry clothes. Ron pulled Potter aside on the way, pulling up the rear, and by the time they made it to the Fat Lady, they had apparently reconciled completely. *Children.*

"Ron says he believes me now," Potter told them all happily, "That I didn't do it," and Hermione let out a shriek of happiness and threw herself on Ron, wet robes and all. Ron made protesting noises as Hermione grasped him around the neck, but Draco could see his ears turn red.

"Oh, that's lovely," said Luna. "And I got to be a second in a duel. It was all so thrilling."

Luna went down to her common room, rushing to avoid breaking curfew, and Hermione and Neville took Ron into the common room. But Potter caught Draco by the arm. "Shouldn't you go take care of Ron now that he's your friend again?" Draco asked, and Potter looked shifty.

"I will, just- will you wait a second?" Potter mumbled. "If I keep you too late, I'll bring you out my cloak to sneak back to the dungeons, I promise."

"Alright, Potter, I'm curious," Draco said, and let Potter walk him around the corridor out of sight, and then behind a suit of armor. Draco's eyebrows went up, thinking very different thoughts at that choice than Potter doubtless was having.

"Draco," Potter said, taking his shoulders and staring into his eyes. Draco's stomach rolled, and his lungs felt almost as tight as they had the first time he'd seen him in months, at the Quidditch World Cup. This was why Draco limited the amount of time he and Potter spent completely alone: because of how addictive it felt, to have the full intensity of Potter's attention. "You gave me my best friend back. Is that why you did it? Did you challenge him for my sake?"

The way Draco flushed must have given him away, but he still haughtily denied it. "Don't flatter yourself, Potter. I was just annoyed he'd made me hang out for no reason with Viktor Krum."

"Okay," Potter said, lips turning up into the sweetest little smile, and then he bit the lower one and looked down bashfully. "So, um, what you said before- the notice is up that there's a visit to Hogsmeade this month, so... would you want for us to go together? Just the two of us?"

"Sure," Draco said, trying to keep his voice level, but then Potter leaned in furtively and pressed a sneaky kiss to his cheek, before sprinting away and past the Fat Lady like he'd planted a bomb and had to escape the blast radius.

That had not been the best way for the universe to dissuade Draco from unnecessary dueling.

The lingering side effect from Draco's attempts to win Ron back over into the fold was the problem of Viktor Krum. The next Saturday night, Draco was relieved to be back to his usual routine, meeting only Ron. But once again, Draco was dragged away early from a comfy fire and a perfectly good book on blood sacrifices to greet Famous Viktor Krum at the entrance. "I warned you," Theo said, and snagged Draco's book for himself.

"Hey," Draco said to Krum cautiously. "What's up?"

He'd wondered if it was about Hermione, but Viktor just gave a moody stare and said, "I am not early this time. Come on. Let us go flying, Malfoy. A deal is a deal."

"Wait, what?" Draco hissed. "I just meant the one night," but Krum had already tuned him out, turning away and staring broodingly into the distance.

So Ron got his wish after all. He showed up only a bit behind Draco and Krum. When he saw not one but two figures flying about above him, one in the robes of the Bulgarian national team, he let out a shriek more high-pitched than any he had produced since first year.

"Draco!" Ron called up. "Draco, is that *Viktor Krum* with you?"

"Yeah, come on, Ron, get a broom," Draco yelled, and dodged rather than caught Krum's next throw of the Quaffle. "Merlin, I hate playing catch with you."

Ron was on a broom and up in the air in record time, dressed in a Weasley jumper and Muggle jeans. Krum eyed him with bemusement. "Hello. I am Viktor," he said, and flew over to shook Ron's hand in the air. Ron's hand trembled so much, the act almost sent him tumbling off his broom. It was like Peter with the Minister of Magic.

"Hello, I am Weasley," Ron babbled. "Ron, I mean. Ron Weasley. I'm me. That's me. Ron. Cor, you're really Viktor Krum. I can't believe it, it's you, right there on a broom, bloody hell-
"

Krum indulged Ron's fanboying with the trained indifference of a real celebrity. Eventually, he flew down and produced a pre-signed autographed photo for Ron to keep. Ron looked too grateful to function, brain split-circuiting, until Krum looked dismally between Ron and Draco. "You are- you are also Harry Potter's friend? And- friends with Herm-i-o-ne?"

"Yes!" Ron shouted ecstatically, like he'd just won the lottery. As if Krum could miss that one of the other Triwizard champions and the girl he liked both tended to have a red-haired beacon beside them. "Yes, I'm Ron Weasley."

"Ja, you said that already," Krum said grumpily, retrieving the Quaffle from the ground and tossing it from hand-to-hand. "Vy are you not in your Quidditch robes like Malfoy, Veasley?"

Draco was not about to let Ron be forced to admit in front of his idol that he wasn't even on his house team. "Ron's a Keeper," Draco said, "Better to practice for that in heavier clothes. Better match preparation." It was utter bullshit, but he said it with enough conviction that Krum seemed to buy they believed that. But he still seemed unable to understand Ron's presence.

"That Wronski Feint you did in the Cup final," Ron said out of nowhere. "Bloody hell..."

"Who are you exactly?" Krum asked, before Draco flew between them and began to attempt the logical impossibility of a fun three-person Quidditch game. Eventually, Ron made the better proposition that they give Krum a flying tour of the castle instead, and seemed to lose some of his nervousness around his idol in his excitement to show him the extent of the grounds, and actually be able to answer his questions about what was in the Forbidden Forest.

No one seemed awake enough to notice their three-man joyride and punish them for it, so Draco had one of the pleasantest flights of his life swooping at increasing pace around the towers of Hogwarts, ignoring Krum and pushing Weasley into a game of air tag. The moon was bright, Hogwarts was eerily beautiful in the mid-November air, Hogsmeade a dim mass of lights in the distance, and Draco experienced a brief rush of ruefulness that he'd driven Potter away from these flights, because no one would have enjoyed this more than him.

Krum seemed to enjoy himself, but he had a sharp word for Draco as they were putting away their brooms and waiting for Ron, who'd gotten rather tangled up in a tree when paying more attention to Krum than where he was flying. "This is vy you vanted me to come, isn't it?" Krum said gloomily. "Because your friend is a fan of mine, and you vant to make him happy, ja? Not really because you vant to play vith me."

"Sorry," Draco said, with nothing to do but shrug, and then Ron had landed and was going on about how they three had to do this every Saturday night now.

"I vill be very busy vith the tournament," Krum said evasively, and bizarrely enough, it looked like Draco might have hurt his feelings a little. Viktor bloody Krum.

"You might as well come, Krum," Draco said loftily. "Otherwise, everyone will think you've gotten too scared of my obviously superior Seeker skills."

"Ve vill not have that!" Krum exclaimed, and committed to Saturdays for the near future. Draco told him not to spread it around, fearing Potter's jealousy, though of course Ron told Potter right away anyway.

There was another motive to Krum wanting to hang out with them, as quickly became clear, once Krum questioned him the next weekend about Hermione. He'd learned how to pronounce her name correctly, and taken to sitting near them in the library, doing a bad job of hiding his staring at her. Not that she ever noticed, except to complain about his presence, which drew giggling girls spying on Krum in turn with no interest in studying.

"He's not even good-looking!" Hermione said once, making Draco wince from knowing how differently Viktor thought about her. "They only like him because he's famous! They wouldn't look twice at him if he couldn't do that Wonky Faint thing-"

"Wronski Feint," Draco and Potter said in unison, and Krum looked over at the sound of two of his favorite words. Draco raised a hand, and Krum gloomily nodded back. He looked like

he would have killed to be in their seats across from Hermione. But whatever effect he imagined his proximity would be having, it didn't seem effective, at least not yet. The one time Draco told Krum in exasperation to just talk to her, he positively fled.

Imagine being that awkward, where you had someone you liked that much, that you would just hang around them that pathetically, not *doing* anything about it. Almost as dumb as Hermione was, for not even noticing it.

Men Who Love Dragons Too Much

Chapter Notes

Playlist

Back in the blue loop, Draco had imagined Potter excited for the First Task, chomping at the bit to get his arrogant self out there in the spotlight and claim yet more glory for his Chosen One shtick. The opposite couldn't be more true. The closer it got to the end of November, the more Potter became a nervous wreck, to the point Draco began grudgingly offering him some of his own calming draughts. Having Ron be Potter's friend again seemed to help, but it couldn't do anything to lift the fear of humiliation or death that seemed to haunt Potter all the time now, a fear he seemed ready to sooner die than admit to Draco. He overheard Harry telling Luna and Hermione, and even Ron once that he had no idea what was coming, and how that drove him insane. But when *Draco* asked Harry if he was nervous, he would always stiffen and start rambling about how ready and how brave he was, and of course he didn't need a calming draught...

Hermione said talking to Sirius helped calm Harry. That made Draco glad he'd given Potter the two-way mirror, though he missed Sirius and even Remus a bit himself. Everything in the world hinged on the Chosen One making it through these pointlessly dangerous stunts in one piece, and Potter was resistant to even letting Draco help. So all he could do was make sure others helped, when Potter was too proud to show weakness in front of Draco himself.

Potter's nerves weren't helped by being a pariah with three of the four houses. When Draco tried to remind him how he, poor Draco, had gone through the same as the so-called Heir of Slytherin, with *four* out of four back in second year, all his friends and even his own father calling him that, Potter just retorted, "No one was writing *articles* about you, were they?"

Skeeter's article in the Daily Prophet had come out, focused almost entirely on Potter. Draco kept the article, clipping it, not at all for the picture of Potter on the front page. It was helpful to remember the lies Skeeter told. He copied the more interesting ones in the fourth notebook. After all, next year, the fight against the Dark Lord would turn into a PR one, with Fudge and Umbridge sticking their noses in. If someone kept a record, someone could at least in the future hold Skeeter or other writers *accountable* for their lies.

Accountable, yes, but not cursed, and not yet.

The funniest parts of the article, of course, were the insinuations about Potter and Hermione, which Draco enjoyed carrying and reading aloud to them ad nauseum when he needed a good laugh. Pansy had apparently expressed the opinion Hermione was only 'stunningly pretty' when judged alongside a chipmunk, but as she'd had the good sense not to say so in front of Draco or Hermione, he granted her clemency yet again. Pansy would have her comeuppance

when she saw how stunningly pretty the international Quidditch star Viktor Krum found Hermione.

Potter came up to him a bit after the article came out, moping that everyone still seemed to be talking about it, and sighed, "Whatever happened to 'No one speaks ill of those associated with Draco Malfoy?'" As if he wanted some written version of Langlock. What would be the equivalent? Cutting her hands off?

"Come on, Potter," Draco sighed, "It wasn't that bad," and Potter eyed him skeptically.

"Be honest. If you didn't know me and you read this article, what would you think of me?"

"Honestly?" Draco said. He didn't have to imagine. He could remember it from the blue loop. "You really want to know? You're not gonna like it. I'm a cynical person."

"Please," Potter said, dropping down beside him at their table and leaning the side of his arm against Draco's. "You're the one who'll always tell it to me straight. Even Ron now is trying to say it's not that bad. But you won't sugarcoat it, just like you didn't about Dementors. Tell me."

"Okay," Draco said, somewhat excited in truth for the rare chance to voice his old opinions on Potter. "If I didn't know you, reading this, I'd hate your guts. I'd think you were someone who'd totally bought into the adulation, like, bought his own hype, got high on his own supply, arrogant fame whore, you name it. That he couldn't stand for anyone to be the center of attention but him, so he'd forced himself into it the one time something *wasn't* actually supposed to be about him, because he's Harry Potter and he's the Chosen One and no matter how much worship he got it wasn't enough-"

"Okay, okay!" Potter held his hands up. "You wouldn't think I was pathetic with all this stuff about my family? 'I know nothing will hurt me during the Tournament, because they're watching over me...'"

Draco's memory came to him clearly. "I'd think it was a transparent attempt to manipulate the public. Remind them you're poor orphaned victim Potter who deserves their sympathy, all their coddling to make up for the parents he never had, so it's only right for him to be given the world."

"Bloody hell, Draco," Potter said, "You are cynical," then rested his chin on his hand to eye Draco closely. "But you don't think that?"

"Of course," Draco said honestly. "None of it. Because I do know you."

"So what, how would you have written the article?"

Draco smiled evilly to himself. "Okay, I'll show you," he said earnestly, and began to scribble on a parchment meant for a Charms essay. Potter nearly lost it when he finally succeeded sneaking a look over Draco's shoulder and read it aloud.

"'Up in the Chamber where the secrets are stored, the Boy Who lived raised the Sword of Gryffindor'- Draco! Shut *up*! You would *not*! Not that bloody *Ballad of the Basilisk*- if you bring that up one more time, I swear-"

"'You're that Chosen Potter who slayed a Basilisk!'" Draco hummed into his ear, before pulling back with a devilish grin. "What, Potter? I think the world deserves to know!"

On the Saturday before the First Task, it came time for the long-awaited Hogsmeade visit. Draco realized belatedly what a jackass he'd been, promising to spend the day with just Potter when it was Luna's first Hogsmeade weekend. When he told her and Hermione, though, they both urged him to 'have fun with Harry' with inconsiderate giggles, even after he insisted it was *absolutely not a date.* Ron said he'd make sure Luna had a great time, no worries, and he should just indulge Potter.

So Draco indulged him, abandoning himself to whatever Potter wanted, his personal penance for the flying he'd barred Potter from. He regretted everything when he woke up that long-dreaded morning, and found himself panicking about what to wear. He knew Potter knew full well it wasn't a date, and would be horrified at any suggestion it was such. But Draco's some stupid part of his brain wasn't getting that, and had him as anxious as Neville before a Potions final. When Blaise attempted to tease Draco about trying on outfit after outfit, Draco brandished the talon wand at him until he shut his mouth.

He ended up in disgracefully Muggle-looking clothes, though at least he had the self-respect to not wear red. Potter had said he would look good in it that one time, but likely just as a house loyalty joke. His red Arsenal kit remained in his trunk where it belonged, and he ended up in his cream-colored pearl cashmere sweater, a cream-colored pea coat, a long thin dark green cashmere scarf, and fitted navy slacks. He put on grey sheepskin gloves, a blue dragon necklace from a set his mother had given for his birthday, and the snake emerald hair clasp Potter had given him. When he looked at himself, he looked so overdressed, he wanted to cast a curse at this plain bathroom mirror, and see if any random travel happened.

"Draco, hey, are you gonna- oh, um, hey. Draco," Theo said, walking past, only for his head to turn and for him to walk right back over. "Wow, uh, you look, er, good in Muggle clothes. Uh-"

Draco took that as the vote of approval it was, from Theo's eyes wandering all over him, following as he left their dorm. But he himself was the one left gaping the second he left the entrance to the dungeons and saw what was there waiting. "Potter?" Draco cried out, loud enough for the entire common room to hear. He only just caught himself from stumbling back and falling over the step. "Salazar, you scared me! Why are you standing there?"

"Because we're going to Hogsmeade together," Potter said, blinking at him guilelessly. Why hadn't Draco realized Potter might come pick him up at his common room? *Because it's not a bloody date.* "No fur hat this time, Draco?" Draco used his wand to wave the entrance shut behind him, and Potter's eyes followed the motion of his hands. "Oh, uh, your gloves are, like, cool. Your whole, um, outfit is- cool, yeah..." Potter's eyes went to himself next, sweeping ruefully over his very different Muggle clothes- a green H Weasley jumper, heavy

black puffer coat, and baggy blue jeans, with large chunky black boots, hair as disheveled as ever. "I'm sorry- I didn't know if I should dress up, or..."

If Draco had needed any more proof this was nothing remotely like a date in Potter's mind, there it was, a mantra even more convincing than the old *Basilisk corpse* standby to remind him- *Weasley jumper.* If Potter showed up to going to Hogsmeade together alone in a bloody *Weasley jumper,* it was pretty safe to conclude thereafter that love was dead before it ever lived.

"You're the one setting the agenda, right, Potter?" Draco drawled as they headed up the stairs. "So you're by default the one correctly dressed, and I'm consequently overdressed. Apologies."

"No, no," Potter said, waving his arms all flustered, and made himself look very suspicious to an ornery Filch checking them for permission to head out of the entrance hall. "No, you look, um..."

Potter never finished his sentence, and they began the walk. "First time legally off to Hogsmeade, Potter," Draco drawled. "How does it feel? Does it have quite the same frisson, when witnessed as a full participatory member of society, and not a wandering desperado?"

Potter didn't say anything, and when Draco turned to look at him, he still asked, "What? Sorry, what did you say?" though he was looking straight at Draco.

Bloody ingrate couldn't even be arsed to pay attention. Draco was missing his favorite cousin's very first Hogsmeade weekend for this? She stepped up to be his second in a duel, no questions asked, and this was how he repaid her? By ditching her for an uncommunicative Potter in a *Weasley jumper*?

Once Draco got Potter talking, he found out how much worse Potter's attire could have been. "To be honest," Potter sighed, "I was tempted to just go in my invisibility cloak. I can't handle all the stares," and as if on cue, some passing Hufflepuff third-years gave them the evil eye.

"Okay, number one," Draco said, "Plenty of people are glaring at me, not you, Potter, I am a uniquely unlikeable person, and number two, I would never go wandering about talking to thin air like a lunatic. There's far too much insanity on my mother's side for no one to think I belonged in St. Mungo's for it. No, you would have been summarily ditched."

"Oh, I would, would I?" Potter laughed, and shoved at Draco's shoulder with his own along the path. "Well, maybe I'd just follow you along to punish you, haunting you like an angry ghost..."

"I know you're a dedicated stalker, Potter," Draco snorted. "Hope I haven't given you any ideas. The places you could follow me while invisible..." Potter made an embarrassed sound and nearly veered off the path, tripping on the curb. Draco grabbed his right hand and hauled him back, making sure he kept his balance. Potter's bare hands felt ice-cold even through the gloves.

"Well," Draco said, "Now I have an idea what to get you for Christmas, your hands are like a Dementor's." That made Potter pout over at him very severely as they came up to Hogsmeade. It was a pity in a way that there would be no Sirius in dog form waiting to greet him, or slap high five with his paw with Luna and Hermione. But Draco knew him safer, off wherever he and Remus had spirited themselves. "What, Potter, if you're so self-conscious with your increased notoriety-"

"Um, Draco," Potter said, cheeks a brilliant red not just from cold. Draco got caught staring at the ocean hue of his eyes for too long in the sunlight, before he followed their gaze down to their joined hands, preventing Potter from walking into Hogsmeade.

"Oh, fuck, sorry," Draco blurted, pulling back like he'd been burned. "Just trying to warm up your hands, Potter, you ungrateful philistine- Focillo- now where are we going, let's do this..."

Potter gave a nod of thanks at the warming charm, and shoved his hands into his coat pockets and looked around. "I don't know. I thought we could just kind of walk around a bit..."

Lovely. So Potter didn't even have a plan. They were both going to end up colossally bored and hating each other before the end of this ill-advised friendship-building venture. Granted, Draco hadn't been bored for a second so far, but that was mostly due to soul-crushing terror that Potter would figure out Draco wished it was a date. Potter began walking along the main street, and Draco followed beside him. It gave him the bizarre urge to do as he could see many of the two-person pairs, almost all male-female but not entirely, and hold Potter's hand again.

He didn't know why he was like this. *Basilisk corpse, Weasley jumper. Basilisk corpse, Weasley-*

"Oh, do you want to go into Honeydukes?"

Draco had been being too quiet, but that was a bad idea. Not only were they likely to run into people they knew there, but he'd lost some of his taste for Honeydukes since last year. "I don't know, Potter, the last time I was in there was kind of..."

"What do you mean?" Potter asked, clueless. Draco thought he was being insensitive and forgetting what was objectively an exciting story, until he realized he really hadn't told Potter about it. So they strolled all the way down Main Street and through back alleys that Draco could trace well after hiding with Sirius in them, and he told the story of fleeing back into Hogwarts through Honeydukes last year.

"Wait," Potter said after a moment, and Draco only knew he'd made a mistake when Potter stopped walking, in a dodgy sort of alley to boot. "Wait, you said you Apparated away from the street outside 12 Grimmauld Place, and then you used Enervate to wake up Sirius. So he couldn't have been the one to Apparate you two, if he wasn't awake- Draco, do you know how to Apparate?" He lowered his voice at Draco's look. "That's what it means, doesn't it?" There didn't seem much point in denying it. "That's illegal! Does anyone else know you can do it?"

"Hermione," Draco said, and hastily explained to head off one of Potter's jealous sulks, "I used Side-Along to take her to Grimmauld to meet Uncle Sirius. Maybe Uncle Sirius and Remus, or Luna, they were around all that time and probably figured it out. Don't look at me like that!"

"How am I looking at you?" Potter whispered, flushing.

"Like I'm some dangerous dark wizard!" Draco hissed vehemently. "Don't *you* start that shit up again!"

"No, it's not that. I guess I was just thinking that every time I think I know most of your secrets, it turns out you have so many more, every time. It's like I'll never know them all..."

"And what would be the point of that?" Draco challenged. "What would happen if you knew *all* my secrets?" Potter just bit his lip and stared at his feet, cowed, and this was officially the worst non-date ever. A reckless need to impress Potter seized Draco then and wouldn't let him go. "Wanna see it, then? Want me to Apparate us somewhere? No one would see us come and go in these back alleys, that's how I know them. I used to use them."

"So you could just use your magic," Potter breathed, "Go anywhere and come back, and take me with you, and no one would be any bit the wiser? Seriously?" There were stars in his eyes.

Draco smirked. "Watch me. Where do you wanna go, Potter?" It was rather naive of Potter to so easily trust an unlicensed wizard with his safety like this, but that was Muggle-raised wizards for you, not raised on cautionary tales of Splinching. "Name it. Anywhere in Britain you want. Go."

It would be better if it was somewhere Draco had been, or could at least picture, but he wanted to sound more confident than he was.

Potter considered, looking nervous but full of anticipation. "Um, okay, how about, er, your house?" He set his jaw stubbornly at Draco's glare. "What, I wanna see where you live!"

It did happen to conveniently be Draco's practice point. The hard part would be the Side-Along, and not for the magic part of that. "Okay, Potter, can do, but I do regret to inform you, for this part, you're really going to have to hold my hand."

"Okay," Potter said, taking Draco's hand far too hard before loosening his anxious grip, and Draco Apparated them to the hillside overlooking Malfoy Manor in the blink of an eye.

"What- what? Oh my God! Draco! Oh my God! Where are we? You did it!" It was worth all the risk to see Potter's genuine amazement, no weaker than how his younger face had shone when Draco told him dragons were real for the first time. Nor did it sting at Draco's heart any less, bittersweet at best, to put that look on Potter's face, because it was too much, too *fake*, when Potter *really* would want nothing to do with him if he knew who Draco really was. He wouldn't want to speak to him, just to give back his wand and walk away. Potter didn't think Draco was cool, he pitied him. He thought he was pathetic, if he thought of him at all. Draco

didn't deserve this moment, as Potter stared out over the grounds of Malfoy Manor like a fairytale castle beneath them.

"Where are we?" Potter asked again. "Why are we at a castle?"

"Potter," Draco said, wrinkling his nose, "This is my *house*." When Potter stared at him wide-eyed, Draco crossed his arms. "What? You said you wanted to see it. Sorry if you wanted to go closer, but I'm not about to risk crossing paths with my father."

"No, it's- *this* is Malfoy Manor?" Potter breathed in disbelief, as if his real first sight of the manor hadn't been as a prisoner taken in by Snatchers, his face hexed almost beyond recognition. "This place? You live *here*? I mean, Hermione said it was fancy, but..."

"If you look in the distance," Draco patiently explained, "You can see the small moving white forms with their tufts of feathers going high, that's all our albino peacocks. And in the back, there's the terrace gardens, and below, there's my favorite garden, the one I told you about, the one I made a bit of for Winky- the house elf at the Cup. There's the golden roses. Focillo," he cast, renewing heating charms on both of them, as Potter shivered but looked rapt at the vista below.

"It looks better from a distance," Draco said with a shrug. "Most things do."

They made it back to Hogsmeade in time to catch the tail end of a Butterbeer with Ron, Hermione, and Luna. Potter was for once obliging and didn't spill anything about where they'd gone. Draco feared that made Hermione at least suspicious, about how their non-date could really be a date. So Draco spun a false but cute story about how he'd bored Potter by spending loads of time in Dominic Maestro's Music Shop, looking at all the music boxes and trying to find a cursed one, then haranguing Dominic Maestro himself, about making him a custom one that was...

"I mean, I've got to give Potter *something* for Christmas."

Luna and some of the nearby Gryffindors hadn't heard the story of the plant-killing music box. Draco was right in the midst of impersonating Aunt Petunia's cursed plants withering away when the door of the Three Broomsticks chimed open and Charlie Weasley came striding in.

Draco noticed his audience had stopped listening, but Potter leaned into his ear and whispered, "Why are you so good at lying?" before either of them noticed Charlie was there, only seeing when Hermione elbowed them.

Great. Now Draco had to bestir himself to pretend to be interested in Charlie. Not that Charlie wasn't fit as fuck, mind. But Draco had just been holding hands with Harry Potter. Going from that to eyeing up anyone else was like going from flying a Firebolt to a stray piece of driftwood.

Draco and Potter followed Hermione and Luna over to join Ron where he was hugging Charlie in greeting, saying hello before Ron dragged his cool big brother to do the rounds, introducing Charlie to anyone who'd listen. Charlie's eyes focused on Draco when he and Ron came back, interested at the sight of the dragon necklace. "Oh, it's blue! Any particular species?"

"Go on," Draco smirked, "By all means, identify it," and let Charlie take the charm in his hand and stand close to examine it. Potter hovered beside him, as if he had any clue about dragon species.

"Swedish Short-Snout," Charlie concluded at last, "Not just the color, it's a dead ringer, nice," and patted the little jeweled head, tugging at each of its little horns playfully before letting it go. "A little dragon for a little dragon, huh?"

"Only Hagrid calls me that," Draco laughed, while Potter cleared his throat.

"So! Charlie! What are you doing in Hogsmeade?" Potter asked, with a forced brightness in his tone about as convincing as Krum's attempts to pretend he didn't like Hermione. Either he was still all pearl-clutching about the age difference, or he must really not like the gorgeous dragontamer giving someone else attention. Poor Potter's bisexual awakening had yielded so few dividends.

"Well," Charlie said with a cheeky grin, "Very covert, top-secret business. Really shouldn't be here, but I couldn't miss the chance to stop by and maybe catch my favorite little brother-"

"Charlie, you monster! How could you!" Fred and George cried out, choosing that moment to announce their arrival, and from there the whole bar descended into merry Weasley chaos.

Charlie ended up tagging along with them on part of the walk back to Hogwarts, and Draco knew full well why he was here. It was still amusing to watch him try to give Potter more and more transparent hints someone might want to come by Hagrid's cottage close before midnight, because someone might see something interesting there. Potter just seemed to get denser and denser, which made no sense until Draco realized that Potter thought Charlie's words were really meant for Draco's ears.

"Hagrid is not going to let you two use his hut to hook up!" Potter yelled, loud enough for everyone in earshot to turn around in shock, and Draco buried his head in his hands. And here he'd thought he'd successfully escaped the non-date without any real humiliation.

"Potter, he's talking to you, not me, you absolute pillock," Draco hissed, red-faced, and Ginny came up excitedly, going,

"Oh, no, Charlie, don't you remember he's fourteen? Well, it's only seven years, it might actually be legal. Is that legal?"

"It's not, I looked it up in a book," Hermione added helpfully.

"It's just about *dragons*, Harry, it's something cool," Charlie hissed, giving him a significant look, and Potter made a huffy noise.

"Oh, I *know*," Potter said darkly, looking between Charlie and Draco, having still somehow missed the point completely. "*Dragons.* And you're a *dragontamer*!"

"The *First Task* is dragons!" Charlie blurted in despair, but it was too late. Potter had already dramatically stalked off down the path.

Ron assured them he'd make sure Potter didn't miss his appointment with Charlie and Hagrid that night to see the dragons. "He can take the invisibility cloak," Ron said, "And maybe I'll go with him, to make sure it all goes smooth and he doesn't get caught. Bloody hell, can you imagine? It's only the First Task, and it's already fire-breathing dragons?"

Hermione reached over and felt over the snout of Draco's dragon necklace with a sigh. "I don't know, Ron. I think our Harry is better prepared to deal with this kind of fire-breathing dragon," she lifted the blue dragon charm, "Than *this* one," she said, and ruffled Draco's hair.

"What? Hey! What's that supposed to mean?" Draco yelped indignantly, but she and Ron and Luna just laughed at Draco all the way back home.

Having given Potter that two-way mirror with Sirius was a mixed bag. On one hand, it let Sirius deliver potentially world-saving information through Potter to Draco, such as suspicions that Karkaroff could have been the one to put Potter's name in the goblet and use the tournament as a way to get at him, by Voldemort's orders. On the other hand, Sirius had Potter hyped about a simple spell to let him get past the dragon, which turned to be a Disillusionment charm. "Is he insane?" Draco asked, casting his gaze around the lake as if this would turn out all to be a prank. "Your godfather has too much faith in you." Hermione and Ron glared at him.

"Hey!" Potter exclaimed.

"*I* can't do that charm, you pillock," Draco hissed, "I've tried, it's too bloody hard," and sped his pace to keep them all walking. The idea of a morning walk around the lake was to get their minds working faster, with Hermione deciding that they could leave off the Karkaroff question until after the First Task and make their priority helping Potter not get killed.

"Draco," Hermione interrupted, "Have you ever seen anyone successfully cast that charm?"

"Yeah," Draco muttered, "My godfather," and paled when they all looked at him expectantly. "Oh, you have got to be kidding me. If you think I could convince him to teach *Potter*-"

What had happened to summoning a broomstick, seriously? That had worked out in the blue loop just fine, even if the prospect of watching Potter try to evade dragonfire on his Firebolt seemed liable to give Draco a heart attack this time around. "You might as well try," said Ron.

"Are you forgetting," Draco hissed, "That this is the man who nearly killed us all last year and fed us to Dementors?"

Ron shrugged. "You're the one who keeps saying he's mellowed since then."

"We," Hermione said firmly, "Are going to the library to look at books on dragons. And you need to go use all of your considerable charm, and all the guilt stored up over his actions last year, to get the Disillusionment charm out of him. You don't need to tell him it's for Harry..."

"You don't think he already discharged that *saving* Sirius?" Draco complained. *And making that lovely dragon charm on your wrist.* But when Hermione gave him orders, sooner or later, he usually found himself obeying.

It all went so much worse than Draco could have even predicted. For starters, he was thoughtless, and woke Severus up barging into his chambers. Severus informed Draco that he would speak to him at noon, when he would wake up for lunch, and went back to bed. So of course Draco used that opportunity to scour the shelves of Severus's private library, on the off chance there was anything that could help with this or the challenges of the whole year, but shockingly enough, the books were almost entirely about potions.

When Severus awoke, Draco had gotten Dobby to deliver them a 'charming godfather-godson lunch' in his chambers, rather than making him exert himself to go all the way up the stairs for Sunday lunch. And it had all of Severus's favorite foods he could think of, which Dobby had proved to have more leverage on the other elves than anticipated, in enlisting their help to specially prepare on short notice. But the presence of jellied eels and even Severus's favorite sherry just made him eye Draco with further suspicion. "What do you *want*, Draco?"

"Er," Draco said. "Can't I just want to spend time with my cool godfather?"

"Is this about Karkaroff?" Severus asked, frowning. "I've seen you watching him, like you expect him to pull out his wand and cast Protego Diabolica all around the Great Hall at any moment." Draco's lack of reaction made him groan and start stabbing his eels vindictively. "Oh, of course you know what that spell is. Draco Malfoy, if you even think of attempting to cast it..."

"No," Draco said brightly, taking the opening, and tried to project some of Luna's wide-eyed ingénue quality, which Severus seemed to find about as convincing as could be expected. "No, not that, not even dark magic, sir-" Oh, that was a mistake. Draco never called Severus *sir* these days except in public or when he wanted something. "Just a simple Disillusionment charm."

Severus surveyed him for a long moment, then heaved a sigh. "For Potter."

"Um," Draco said weakly, "No?" Severus arched an eyebrow at him rather cuttingly. "Well, er, not *just* for Potter... really, I think it would be useful to add to my own arsenal..."

"Out!" Severus barked! "And take this disgusting feast with you." He stopped and raised a hand once a wilting Draco picked up the tray. "Leave the sherry."

"So, that was a bust," Draco told everyone at their library table, flopping into his customary seat. Krum seemed to be in his behind them. "Hello, Luna, you look pretty today. Find anything?"

"No," Hermione said sullenly. "Draco, why don't you ever say *I* look pretty today?"

"It's different," said Draco, but he had no desire to hurt her by explaining that Luna made far more interesting sartorial choices, such as today's ribbon-crossed Rapunzel braid and earrings in the shape of armadillos. "She's my cousin-"

"Yeah, Draco, why don't you ever say *I* look pretty today?" Ron echoed in a falsetto, leaning forward batting his eyelashes. Draco whacked at him soundly, even as Ron had made him snort in a very undignified pig-like manner through his nose.

"See," Draco said, "Luna is my cousin, she knows I don't mean it as a come-on. And I'm a realistic man. I know my strengths and weaknesses. Weaknesses? The Patronus charm, Boggarts, the Disillusionment charm. Strengths? Everything else. Especially my *looks*, so if I go around throwing senseless compliments to all and sundry, I'll have even *more* people inconveniently infatuated-"

"Who's *infatuated* with you?" Potter gasped.

Wow, Draco's presence was really helping them make progress at the whole Potter-not-dying thing. "Well, Pansy Parkinson, for one." Their unimpressed gazes showed higher expectations. "Theodore Nott-" Hermione put a hand to Potter's mouth to silence his indignant shriek. Must have given him war flashbacks to that one sordid interlude with the Polyjuice Potion. Draco strained his mind for any more remotely plausible names. "Adrian Pucey, Zacharias Smith, the list goes on, it's a trial but I try to bear up under it with grace, now have we figured out how to save Potter's hide?" He picked up a book from the stack and smirked. "Oh, look. This one's rather topical."

"*Men Who Love Dragons Too Much*," Luna read with a smile, and reached out to play with his dragon necklace today, a black Ukrainian Ironbelly. "Can one really love a dragon *too* much?"

At breakfast the next morning, Potter didn't go straight with Ron and Hermione to Herbology- not that Draco had his schedule memorized- and instead went heading up the stairs. It wasn't just fear something was wrong that had Draco racing after him. Over a sleepless night, he'd come to the realization that Potter not having a plan was his fault, since he'd given Potter that mirror and changed things from the blue loop, since Sirius had given Potter a plan that didn't work.

So if no one else was going to tell Potter to use a summoning charm to get his broom, well, Draco would just have to be the one to do it...

"Hey, Potter," Draco said, not giving a flying fuck if he lost points for Slytherin being late to Ancient Runes. "Listen, I have something I have to tell you..."

"Later, Draco, I have to catch Cedric," Potter said, and Draco followed him following Cedric with a bunch of his annoying cronies. He didn't answer Draco's pestering why until he had resorted to surprisingly duplicitous ends and used a discrete cutting charm to make Diggory's bag break and separate him from his cronies. Sycophantic as they had seemed, they didn't scruple to race into Charms and leave him to clean up his mess. Draco hoped they were here on some very un-Gryffindorish sabotage mission, until Potter said, "I have to tell him about the dragons."

"You have to *what*?" Draco yelled, and followed Potter towards to Diggory, trying and failing to keep his voice down. "What are you thinking, Potter? Stop! You can't!"

Diggory looked up, a ruined ink-covered Transfiguration book in hand. "Hey, Harry, Draco, what are you two-"

"Don't tell him!" Draco shouted in real desperation, not caring if anyone inside Charms heard either. "Are you mad? Do you want to lose any advantage you have?"

"Maxime and Karkaroff were there at Hagrid's," Potter protested, "So Fleur and Krum will both know by now- it's not fair for him to be the only champion not to know-"

"Know what, Harry?" Diggory asked, stepping closer with natural curiosity, and there was his fatal error, know it or not. Without this bizarrely self-defeating show of absolute fairness, Diggory would have presumably been left in the dark about the First Task, and done so badly his points total would be lower overall- maybe shaken up his confidence and ruined his performance further, even injured him out of the tournament entirely, and saved him from being there holding that Portkey with Potter. It was Potter's fault, if Draco messing about with the Portkey failed, and Karkaroff still managed to get him and Diggory to Voldemort- it wasn't Draco's fault, it wasn't-

"The First Task is-"

"Don't you dare, Potter!" Draco exclaimed.

"The First Task is dragons," Potter said, voice steady with his conscience clear, and Draco wanted to cast the Cruciatus curse on him. "They've got four, one for each of us, and we've got to get past them."

Diggory looked skeptical, but when he glanced over at Draco, some of Draco's incoherent rage at Potter telling seemed to convince him there was smoke to this fire, at least. "Are you sure?"

"Dead sure," said Potter, "I've seen them." And it was too damn late.

"You," Draco hissed at Potter, with every ounce of venom he had ever accumulated towards Potter over the years, "You pathetic, weak-willed do-gooder, you deserve to get burned alive!"

Draco stormed off, and had the singular indignity of noticing that the champions behind him just turned to each other and resumed sharing intelligence, ignoring him. He heard Crouch's fake voice, and that was always enough to make him run. And his Ancient Runes professor seemed likely to give him detention for being late, so Draco just claimed that Severus had needed his help on something. He knew Severus would back up the lie, and that was that.

He tried to avoid the Gryffindors the rest of the day, though he had Double Arithmancy with Hermione. He didn't sit with her for once. But she kept trying to catch his eye during the lesson, though he would have thought her less friendly, given he'd just told one of her real best friends he *deserved to get burned alive.* Not Draco's finest moment, to be sure. And he sprinted out of Arithmancy the second it was over, and managed to evade her, though he heard her calling his name after him. After that, he naturally didn't go to the library, but that just left him all the more open to facing the consequences of his failed attempt to do good. He would have preferred Hermione.

Diggory came up to him right after dinner, ambushing him before he'd even gotten to the stairs down to the dungeons. "Draco," Diggory said with an almost Gryffindorish determination on his face, "Can we talk?" He looked bemused by the hooting of the Slytherins around them, though if he hadn't picked up by now that Draco had been pretending to have a crush on him, he really was as thick as any other Hufflepuff.

"Fine," Draco muttered, wanting to cause a scene in front of a smirking Blaise even less than he wanted to talk to Diggory, who he was pretty sure he could take in a duel if it came to it.

"Come on," Diggory said, and led him right out the doors of the entrance hall, onto the steps of Hogwarts, where he sat and Draco had to follow suit. "Draco, what was that today?"

"Potter wasn't lying, if that's what you want to do," Draco said with a Severus-length eye-roll. "He and his Gryffindors have been losing their shit all day trying in vain to come up with a way to stop him becoming the Boy Who Was Barbecued."

"No," Diggory said, shaking his head, and took a deep breath to steel himself, as if it took great courage for him to confront *the* Draco Malfoy. "I heard you, you know. Screaming at Potter, telling him not to tell me. You were so angry when he did. Draco, I don't really know you, but we've played Quidditch against each other for years... I don't understand why you'd hate me enough to let me face a dragon unwarned..."

"It's not about you, Diggory, cut the self-absorption," Draco snapped, trying not to look over at Diggory's face, as Draco's inability to stop Potter that morning had turned it one step closer to becoming that cold dead corpse face turning blue that Draco remembered in a sobbing father's arms. "Potter's my friend, so I want him to win, obviously. And I'm a Slytherin. I just don't believe in giving the opponent an advantage. If you were the only champion witless enough not to figure it out or get a teacher to help you, then you deserve to face the dragon blind. It's the Triwizard Tournament, people are *supposed* to get hurt."

"And you want me hurt," Diggory said slowly. "Because my father tried to arrest you?"

"What is it to you, Diggory?" Draco sneered, and Diggory's handsome face flashed in anger.

"Plenty," Diggory snapped. "If Potter hadn't been so good a person, you would have had me going up unprepared against actual *dragons*. And you'll be *helping* Potter all through the tournament, won't you- maybe Krum too, everyone says you two go flying together- and maybe even Fleur and Beauxbatons, you got that commendation when Beauxbatons arrived for helping them-" Draco opened his mouth, and the paranoia poured out of Diggory. "Who's to say you won't take a more active role going forward? Try and sabotage me? *Everyone* in this school knows the things you've done. What you're capable of-"

"You flatter me, Diggory," Draco drawled. "Don't tell me you're scared of a *fourth-year*."

"I bet you were the one to conjure the Dark Mark," Diggory blurted.

He looked to regret it almost immediately, hand going over his mouth. Even if that regret was only for what Draco might do to him for saying it. Was that hand meant to be protecting his tongue?

As it happened, Draco *had* considered actively sabotaging Diggory, but to save his life, not that the ingrate would ever understand that. "Sounds like you'd better watch your back then, huh?"

"Draco?" a voice came from above them, and Draco groaned.

"Stalker," he greeted equably, and Potter glared down at him.

"Hermione wants to talk to you," he said tightly. "Um, hey, Cedric."

"Hey, Harry," Diggory called, raising a hand, "Thanks for telling me today," and they exchanged cordial, sportsmanlike nods before Draco was being dragged inside Hogwarts by the tie.

"See me on the Marauder's Map?" Draco sighed, and eventually followed Potter up the steps to avoid being dragged. "Um, Potter, you know I'm banned from Gryffindor Tower, don't you?"

"No you're not. You've hung out with us there before."

"Yeah," Draco said slowly, coming to a stop in front of the Fat Lady, "But that was before I got caught in the middle of the night in a Gryffindor's bed. I got banned after. Think, Potter, you surely must recall which *one*."

Potter's hands both went up to his face. "Oh, God! Right! Yeah, um... I'll get Hermione and Ron..."

It turned out Crouch was good for something more than terrorizing Karkaroff, and had given Potter advice that he would end up using. Taking him one step closer to the doom Crouch had planned for him, needless to say. The trouble was, Potter was so inept at summoning charms it was a fifty-fifty shot whether he'd get one cast before the dragon got him first.

And naturally, after having made a public show of using one on a Snitch at the very start of first year, Draco along with Hermione was the natural expert they turned to for improving

this dismal state of affairs. Draco only promised to help until he had to leave for curfew, though Potter offered to walk him to the dungeons and back in his invisibility cloak.

In that first session, all they really established was that Draco and Hermione were very good at the summoning charm, and Potter and Ron were very bad at it. When Draco let slip that Luna was also good at the charm, Potter looked liable to surrender to despair and let himself be eaten by any dragon who called dibs first. "Don't worry, Potter," Draco said, rolling his eyes. "I don't *really* think you deserve to be burned alive." He ignored Ron's whisper to Hermione, *That was a question that required clarification*? and went over to poke at Potter's scar. "I'll make sure you get it in time."

False Pride

Chapter Notes

Playlist

Draco found out the next morning that the trio had stayed up past two in the morning, summoning everything to them in the common room that wasn't bolted down. "He's still totally out of it," Hermione said with a sigh, and when she demanded Draco come sit with them when they watched the Task, Draco didn't protest, just trying to tell her that Potter would be fine.

He had to work at convincing himself that all day, so much so that he barely heard a word of all of his classes. His last lesson was History of Magic, and he left the classroom without any idea what the class had even been about. All he could do was race away from the other Slytherins towards the Task, gulping down double-fisted vials of calming draught and draught of peace. For the first time, he felt like he was about to have a panic attack not about himself but someone else. But it was about him, because he had been the only one other than Crouch or maybe Karkaroff to know Potter's name would be pulled out of the Goblet of Fire. So if something went wrong, if Potter died here, it would be Draco's fault...

When he arrived, he had little trouble finding Ron and Hermione, with them sitting with all the other Weasleys and their bright red hair. He yelled over for Luna until she heard and joined them, only to sigh when she realized she'd been summoned so Draco could grip her hand for dear life.

"Oh, Draco, you don't need to be so worried, he'll be alright," Luna said. "Probably."

Potter was off in the champion's tent, probably dying of nerves the same as Draco, and so none of them got to see him until after the Task had started, and all three champions went before him. Diggory was first with his Swedish Short-Snout, and Draco stared balefully down at him, telling himself he wasn't rooting for the dragon here. If Hermione knew what he was thinking, she'd nag him endlessly about it. Diggory succeeded, but at least his marks weren't splendid. Draco remembered Potter and Krum being tied for first after this task over. He'd been senselessly annoyed by that in the blue loop, given that in Potter vs. dragon the first time, he'd been whole-heartedly rooting for the dragon.

Delacour's performance against her Welsh Green was the same as Draco remembered. It would be her best at any Task this tournament, if not up to Potter and Krum's standard. Krum took on his Chinese Fireball the same way as well, with the same results, including a ludicrously high score from Karkaroff. It made no sense to Draco, why Karkaroff would push for Krum so hard if his target was to get Potter to the Portkey first, but then Draco remembered that Krum had assaulted other champions in the maze. Karkaroff would have

had every chance to be the one to cast Imperius on Krum, and use him as his hitman, taking out all the champions but Potter, and then presumably himself. Best get Krum as far ahead into the maze as possible, even before Potter.

And then the handlers brought out the Hungarian Horntail, a much less pretty version of the pendant around Draco's neck. She was led by a chain on her neck to sit over a nest full of eggs, her obsidian gloss of black scales shimmering in the sunlight. Her tail was spiked and thrashing, leaving marks in the ground like Draco had left when his Sectumsempra curse thankfully missed hitting Sirius. Draco had spent much of the First Task the first time round awed by the dragons, his childhood fascination returning with them, but he found much less goodwill in him towards the Horntail. If she took out Potter before Potter could take out the Dark Lord, then Draco would have to strive to add Dragonslayer to his list of titles.

And then Potter emerged from the tent, incredibly small-looking from so high, and facing the bulk of the most fearsome of all four of the dragons. His messy hair, his glasses, his champion's robes, all looked ready to be blackened and burned in Draco's anxious eyes, and he didn't know what he'd been thinking, letting this tournament go on. He should have gone to Dumbledore himself... should have falsely confessed before the names came out that *he'd* been the one to put Potter's name in the goblet, to stop the public reading, stop Potter from being put before this beast...

"Accio Firebolt!" Potter shouted. Ron and Hermione looked nervous, but Draco was relatively sure this part at least would work. And so it did, that lone brave figure soon the target of the speeding Firebolt, flying through the air almost as precise and quick as graceful as when Potter was riding it. And he climbed onto it, like this was no different than a Quidditch match, like he had no fear of death, and kicked off into the air, and soared.

Draco buried his face in Hermione's hair and shoulder. "Hide my face, I can't watch this," Draco whined, and felt Weasley-like fingers poking him.

"He did this in the Chamber of Secrets too," Ron laughed, though his fear for his best friend was there in his voice too. "Come on, Draco, that thing isn't a Basilisk. It's not going to petrify you if you look into its eyes-"

"I can't watch!" Draco repeated, covering his ears and throwing himself more completely on Hermione, shaking and whimpering. Luna began to soothingly stroke his back, while much less soothingly beginning her own narration of events for his benefit. "Stop it, Luna, don't say- I don't want to know- I can't look till it's over-"

Ron chuckled weakly. "So much for having changed from being a scaredy-cat since first year, huh, Draco? COME ON, HARRY!"

It seemed to take forever hiding there, just trying to breathe, with all his remaining senses shot through with nauseous fear. And then Hermione was pushing him away and telling him Potter had gotten his golden egg, the crowd going crazy around them, Weasleys hugging like there was no tomorrow. He still couldn't breathe until he looked and saw Potter up high above them, streaming through the air on his Firebolt, gold shining beneath his arm. Really, why should anyone have ever doubted Potter's ability to capture something gold from a broomstick?

"Look at that!" Bagman was yelling. "Will you look at that! Our youngest champion is quickest to get his egg! Well, this is going to shorten the odds on Mr. Potter!"

How could Potter have possibly been the quickest? The way it had felt for Draco, it had surely taken him twice as long as all the other champions put together.

"Come on, let's go! Let's go congratulate him!" Ron cried ecstatically, all his jealousy looking long-forgotten. Draco shook his head, and pulled away when Ron tried to help him up.

"You go on without me," Draco said weakly, trying to swallow back bursts of nausea to his throat, though they didn't seem likely to turn to full retching. "We shouldn't overwhelm him."

Hermione looked disapproving. "You know he'll be disappointed if you don't come too."

"Here," Draco said, pushing his cousin forward. "Luna, you go, as our family representative. Tell Potter this is too much excitement for me, and I'm off to take to my sickbed again."

"Really?" Hermione asked, looking worried, and Draco shrugged.

"Enjoy your partying, children," he said, getting up and waltzing off.

"You won't even stay to hear the scores?" Ron called after him, and Draco shrugged again.

"The Slytherins will tell me!" he yelled, and made it back to his dorm as quickly as he could.

He was being a bad friend, objectively, abandoning Potter in his moment of triumph, so soon after threatening and screaming at him. But he couldn't stand to go anywhere but inside his locked bed curtains once he had secured himself, wishing for the first time in a while he hadn't given Imoogi to Hagrid. He could have used something to grab onto, to hold in his arms as he curled up waiting for his body to calm and go back to normal. It eventually did, but it took a long time.

Potter got a 8, 9, 9, 10, and 4. Draco had a good idea who that 4 was from.

"Karkaroff, right, Theo?" Draco sighed, and crawled back into bed. When Theo was left just standing there uncertainly, Draco rolled his eyes and drawled, "Bye, Theo. Unless you want to join me..." Theo, predictably, slipped away at that without another word.

The calm after the storm ensued, as most all the school but Draco's Slytherins had seemed to come around to Potter being a champion. Potter now had more energy to devote to sulking that Draco hadn't come to the tent after, or to any of the celebrations. To Draco's reminder he wasn't allowed in the Gryffindor common room anyway, Potter just heaved a dramatic sigh.

The only hitch in Draco's newfound sense of calm- the Second Task scared Draco far less than the first, despite the theoretical risk to Hermione in it- was the story the Gryffindors told him of Rita Skeeter nosing around in one of their Care of Magical Creatures classes, as if she couldn't have just watched in beetle form. Draco did have a vague memory of some pointless saga with her writing an article smearing Hagrid, and Hagrid having a meltdown and refusing

to teach for a while. He remembered being fiendishly gratified at the time, none the least because it was hard to think of anything further beneath the dignity of a Malfoy than handling Blast-Ended Skrewts. When he looked through his fourth notebook, though, it apparently hadn't seemed important enough to merit a mention anywhere.

He got it out of Potter, though, that Skeeter had scheduled an interview with Hagrid that Friday night at the Three Broomsticks. This was an alteration to the blue loop Draco was confident making, and doing all by himself, though at last minute he let Luna in on it, because he thought she'd find it fun. She did indeed, spurred on by her natural Quibbler competitiveness as well as fondness of Hagrid. She accepted the task of going and letting Hagrid know that word had come that Skeeter was canceling the interview and article, being inherently more trustworthy than him.

Draco, meanwhile, snuck out the passage to the Honeydukes cellar, for the first time since fleeing from the duel with Aurors last year, dressed in jeans and a baggy red Arsenal hoodie to hide his hair. He wouldn't be as intimidating like this, but neither would anyone be as likely to recognize him and get him in trouble. And there was only one person he needed to recognize him.

Friday night at the Three Broomsticks proved happening enough that Draco was glad for the relative disguise, and glad for his growth spurt over the summer to keep his youth from standing out too much. He didn't go anywhere near the bar, just looked around for Skeeter's blonde head, and found she had done him the favor of securing an isolated corner behind a set of columns for her interview. Figured, she would be trying this transparently to isolate and trap her prey.

But all she had done was trap herself. "You'll have to forgive Hagrid," Draco said coolly, sliding into the chair across her. "Muffliato," he cast, before telling her, "The interview's been canceled. As has the feature in the Prophet about it. Terrible, I know, but I'm sure you can find someone else to ruin quickly enough."

Skeeter looked genuinely shocked for a few seconds, drawing her bright purple cloak tighter around her defensively, before she seemed to realize that the person speaking so decisively before her was a teenager. Draco pushed back his red hood, knowing it inevitable she would catch on to his identity anyway, and used the full force of his ice gray Malfoy eyes on her newly condescending stare.

"Oh, you must be... young Draco Malfoy, is it? I was told all about you, when completing a feature on the Hogwarts champions. Apparently you have defied the odds, and despite your... family history, become quite good friends with Harry Potter himself."

She'd had the good sense to keep Draco's name out of the first article. Now, though, she was looking at him like she was all-too-glad to have him replace Hagrid, with the promise of a far juicier story. "I'm not here to talk about myself. It's about Hagrid. You're going to leave him alone."

"Oh, am I?" Skeeter simpered, twirling her Quick-Quotes quill between her fingers. Draco considered, tilted his head, and then withdrew the talon wand, and began to imitate her motion, soon exactly the same as hers. She looked down without showing the appropriate

nerves at it, though. Either tales of Draco's full reputation at Hogwarts hadn't come to her yet, or she was just a hard woman to crack. "And why exactly, Draco, am I going to do that?"

"Because," Draco said calmly, "I told you to."

She laughed at first at this, dropping her quill and covering her mouth to titter, until something in Draco's impassive tone and gaze seemed to make her quiet. "I don't take orders from children, dear boy," she said airily, though he'd made her take a large gulp of her Firewhisky.

"Oh, this is not an order, Skeeter," Draco said, taking on Severus's intonation. "This is a threat. One would have thought a woman of your experience could discern the difference."

"And what exactly," she said with a brave face, "Are you threatening?"

Draco considered, finding himself right in his element, more than he could have hoped. "Well," he drawled, beginning to enjoy himself now, "There are ways even a *child* can make your life more difficult. Flagrante," he said, and tapped her Quick-Quotes Quill. "Are those expensive? I wouldn't advise touching that, ever again- come on, why did you have to touch it?" Draco complained, as she reached out to feel it, only for a scalding heat to sear her palm. She shrieked, but no one could hear her.

"I warned you. Quills don't stay useful when they write ill-advised things against the associates of Draco Malfoy. Nor do tongues when they speak ill of his associates. Langlock!" Skeeter's muffled cries abruptly went more muffled, as her tongue stuck to the top of her mouth. She grasped at her throat and then her tongue, eyes bulging wide in terror. "Oh, I'm sorry, is that too awkward for you, dear? Here, let me fix that for you. *Oscausi!*" Draco cast, and her paralyzed mouth disappeared completely, turning to blank skin like there had never been a mouth there at all.

Skeeter's eyes pleaded with him, not seeming to dare to think of going for her wand. "Oh, no," Draco said, with ostentatiously facetious sympathy, sadism foremost in his voice. "Is that not better? Not what you would have preferred? Alright. Finite incantatem." Skeeter fell forward, gasping and clutching at her mouth and chin as he released the curse. "You aren't writing the article on Hagrid. Any questions?" Skeeter shook his head wide-eyed. "Pleasure doing business with you. *Beetle.*" She looked ready to explode at that. "Yes, I know about that too. I know everything about you. So you could lose more than your mouth if you cross me. Good day, Miss Skeeter." He rose to his feet while she trembled in her seat.

Her eyes went to the cursed Quill, and Draco shook his head wryly, drawing his hood over his head. "No chance," he told her, "That stays as is, beetle lady," and gave her a jaunty wave before sauntering out of the Three Broomsticks, happy as a clam.

His self-satisfaction only lasted until the next day, when Severus came right up to what was probably the last football scrimmage of the season, between himself, Dean, Seamus, and Hermione. Soon, it would be too cold for them to have their Saturdays, but Severus did not scruple to interrupt and demand Draco leave it with him. So it was that Draco was wearing an Arsenal kit and Arsenal sweatpants when Severus took him to his chambers, sat him down, and informed him he had received a most *interesting* letter from one Miss Rita Skeeter.

Draco didn't try to hide his guilt, not to Severus. "She reported me? To you?" A nod. "Just to you?" Another nod. "She knew you were my Head of House... but why not Dumbledore?"

"It might have something to do," Severus said dryly, "With her recent references to him in her articles as an 'obsolete dingbat'. Clearly, she thought me the better option to secure some form of discipline for you... or protection for herself. I wrote back, of course, that I would discipline you *severely*, and that she would never hear from you again. You will be pleased to know she did write that the article about Hagrid has been scrapped, thanks to your... heroics."

Draco quivered at the unpleasant curl of Severus's lip. "Sir, I'm sorry... I just couldn't let her write some lies about Hagrid, probably get him fired..."

"And that," Severus said flatly, "Was worth demonstrating your potency at dark magic to one of the most widely-read reporters in the country? What were you thinking, *foolish* boy?"

Draco sunk deeper into his armchair, fearing he had taken Severus's largesse for granted too long. "I frightened her, though."

"Far more formidable wizards than you, over the years," Severus said darkly, "Have thought they silenced that blight on civilization Skeeter. Some may have thought they managed it, for a time, only to find that they had not truly succeeded, and regretted their threats. You have gotten into the habit, I fear, of thinking yourself untouchable. Invulnerable. I am much to blame in this, for neglecting to ever really punish my errant godson when he steps out of line. That ends now."

"Severus?" Draco said weakly, and lifted his face from behind his hands when Severus scowled at them scorchingly enough. "What will you-"

"Detention," Severus said smoothly, "Every Saturday night, for the rest of the year."

"What?" Draco cried. "But that's when you gave me permission to go flying..."

"Perhaps," Severus said, "Before swanning about playing the Dark Lord rising, you should have thought more about what you stand to *lose.*"

"Sunday night?" Draco said in a small voice. "I mean- I've already got detention this Saturday, so..."

Draco couldn't read if Severus was truly angry, or holding some detail back. "From whom?"

"Mad-Eye Moody," Draco admitted, "He hates me," and Severus heaved a long sigh.

"Ever working hard to make yourself enemies, are you not, my burdensome godson?"

"It *is* impressive," Draco quipped, "How much both he and Karkaroff hate my guts. They'd be horrified to know they actually agree on something. See, Severus, I'm a *peacemaker.*"

"Very well, then, you will make peace on Saturdays, and potions on Sundays. Report to the potions classroom at 8 tomorrow night with all of your potions supplies."

"You- you're giving me extra Potions lessons?" Draco had finally found someone worse at punishments than his father. "That's what detention means?"

"Do not think it has escaped my attention, Draco, how boringly easy you find nearly all of your classes. It will do you good, and teach you humility, to be taught something you have to work for once to learn. A godfather must resort to his last recourse and simply seek to *keep you busy.*"

"Thank you, Severus!" Draco exclaimed, impossible to pretend it wasn't a reward. "I won't let you down! I'll be the best Potions student you've ever had!"

Draco did have at least some intention of doing so, or at least not proving too burdensome a pupil for Severus after all. Until tomorrow, though, he intended to suck up every bit of remaining early December sunlight he could. It had started up sleeting again outside, though, so he knew before having to go outside that sunlight was done, and football definitely with it. Probably flying tonight, which was for the best. Draco had night detention with Crouch, ominously enough, and Draco didn't want to think about the fanboying horror show that would be Krum and Ron out flying together alone.

This was why it wouldn't have been the worst thing if he could have succeeded in that attempt last year to steal the Marauder's Map, and kept it. Just things like finding your friends would be so much easier in this massive old castle. Draco had to go into the Slytherin dorms to change out of his football clothes anyway, though, before he could go looking for Hermione again. After changing, though, on his way out through the common room, a nervous girl's voice called out, "Um, Draco? Draco! Draco, can I talk to you about something?"

The voice was Pansy's, and she was standing right in front of the fire without seeming to feel the impact of the blaze near her shins. She was fidgeting from foot to foot, with her hair pulled back half-up and with more make-up on than usual, socks black and going up to mid-thigh instead of her usual knee-high length. But Draco didn't have a ghost of a suspicion, mind going to Pettigrew again, until the entire common room burst out hooting and squealing. "Go on, Pansy!" some of the seventh-year girls called out, and Draco couldn't tell if they meant to be encouraging or mocking.

Whatever Pansy wanted, even if it wasn't something good for Draco, he wasn't about to let her get embarrassed in front of half their house. "Come on, Pans," Draco said, and beckoned her off with him. He led her into the empty Potions classroom, and for once, she passed up the chance to suck up complimenting him, though she looked impressed by the Sanguirenere spell. But she looked more nervous than anything, even without anyone hooting or catcalling. She looked like she was trying to summon up the courage to ask someone out- surely not Draco, she had to know he was gay by now- and that must be why everyone had been hollering like that. But why had they all just assumed it was something romantic?

Oh, wait. The bloody Yule Ball.

Draco had known this was coming longer than anyone else, and had made a very simple plan for it back then: *Don't*. It was as such that the announcement of the Yule Ball a few days ago had not only been unsurprising but uninteresting, as it had long had nothing to do with him in

his mind. He'd been more preoccupied dealing with Skeeter's predatory hovering around Hagrid, and thought his only involvement in the childish affair of the ball would be eventually having to grill Krum over Hermione. Maybe at worst, he'd have to dole out advice to Ron or Potter on it. But he was as off-limits as a date to anyone as if he had been one of the professors, there as a stolid chaperone.

Or so he had thought. Pansy clutched her hands in front of herself, highlighting her cleavage, in her uniform with the tie loose and the buttons half-undone. It would have been impressive if he hadn't realized long ago how he'd been fooling himself, acting like he was excited about any girl at all. "Um, Draco," she said, and took a deep breath, before pursing her glossed lips and asking, "Draco, will you go to the Yule Ball with me?"

Draco remembered this back in the blue line. He'd gone to Pansy right after the announcement. Rather than ask her, he'd simply informed her, "We're going to the ball together," and she had by all appearances been flattered and fallen happily in line. It was a miserable evening they'd spent together, pretending to be having a good time, pretending not to be jealous of everyone around them. Draco hoped she'd be able to find someone to show her a better time this go around.

And she had asked him a question. He had never thought he would care this much about letting someone down easy, let alone someone who wasn't even his friend. But their relationship in the blue loop made him feel irrationally guilty for not repeating it, as if he was cruelly discarding her, when this Pansy had no claim on him besides her own disappointed fantasies. "Pansy, I'm gay." Was there a way to rig up a button he could push and it would say that phrase for him?

"I know," Pansy said, seeming encouraged if anything to not get a straight no. "But you've got to go to the ball with *somebody*- and you won't want to get in trouble with your parents, will you, taking a boy, and you'd seem like a weirdo taking your cousin- not because of, um, anything about her," she added hastily, "Just because she's your *cousin*. So, I mean, why shouldn't..."

Her voice trailed off awkwardly at last, like she'd thought it out and somehow convinced herself of a possible positive result from that incredibly sad defense of herself as a ball date prospect.

"Thank you, Pansy. I really appreciate it. Seriously, I do." God, he didn't do *letting down easy* well. He sounded like some robot programmed to impersonate Draco Malfoy, one having serious malfunctions. "But I'm not planning to go to the ball. I'm not even showing up."

"Oh," Pansy said uncertainly, scuffing her shoe against the wall. "You're going home?"

"No, I'm staying at Hogwarts, I'm just not going to the *ball*," Draco sighed, and saw on her face she would need an explanation at the least. "Pansy, I have no interest in that glorified festival of forced heteronormativity." Okay, maybe she'd need a different explanation. "It's not my kind of thing, okay?" That looked hard for her to believe, given the similarity to his family's yearly Christmas Eve gala, but Draco persisted. "I'm sorry, Pansy, I'm really just not going, period. I'm not changing my mind for anyone."

"But if you were going," Pansy said in a low voice, "Who would you go with?"

"A boy," Draco said bluntly, unsure if it was a lie. "And damn what my parents think."

All in all, Draco had done an admirable job turning her down nicely. He didn't tell anyone what she'd done, and didn't see her crying, then or later. He smiled and nodded at her at the table, and she nodded back, even if her smile was a bit wobbly. But that would get better given time.

Far more imposing was the prospect of detention with Crouch. He was ready for a veritable torture session, and all the warier when Crouch just set him to copying lines, telling him to spend the full two hours writing *I will not be insolent in class* over and over. It was onerous and demeaning, but it wasn't even with a Black Quill. Compared to Umbridge, this was amateur hour, so much it made Draco suspicious of a hammer readied to be dropped.

The hammer came, but not from Crouch. Crouch stepped out during the second hour, after which Draco quickly cast charms on his hand to lessen the irritation of constant writing, slowing down to a crawl. He yawned, stretched, and then quickly tried to look official and serious when the door opened. The effort was wasted, though. It was only Potter, who'd never looked official and serious a day in his life.

He just looked exactly as Harry Potter was supposed to look, the same messy black hair and big round glasses and big green eyes and Gryffindor uniform that Draco had seen a thousand times before. Except there was something different about him, something that had Draco sitting up in his chair, sensing agitation or danger or *something*. It made Draco's skin crawl, thinking something could have gone wrong, maybe with one of their friends. "Potter, what are you doing here?" Draco asked, trying to keep his cool. "I have detention with Moody."

"I know, Hermione told me, um, so yeah, I know you'd be here," Potter said, and walked over to Draco, looking down at the lines he'd written. They were innocuous enough not to hold his attention, though, so he just leaned a hand on Draco's desk and looked up from them at Draco's face, making a poor attempt to seem casual in his stance. He looked like he'd trip over his own feet any second now. "You're, uh, pretty hard to get alone, you know? I think I've told you that before, just- I've been trying for the past couple days, Hermione tried to help, and we didn't manage, so, um, I'm sorry to interrupt your detention, just- Moody stepped out?"

"He could be back any second, Potter," Draco sighed, thinking it couldn't be anyone they cared about in mortal peril, if Potter was beating around the bush this senselessly. "Just getting something from his office. So whatever you wanted to say, you'd better spit it out while you can."

Potter closed his eyes, looking like he had in the days he was preparing to face the dragon. Like even his Gryffindor courage was being drained almost dry, by the task he had to force himself to endure. Except in truth, he'd seemed a bit *less* daunted by the Hungarian Horntail.

"So, yeah, I guess I should just say it, huh? Just, yeah, just spit it out. Um- Draco- yeah, that is, do you think that you'd- I mean, I don't know if anyone already- I mean, I'm sure someone asked already, you're, um- but I thought I should just try-"

"Potter," Draco said, tilting his head to eye him even more dubiously. Potter's other hand fell flat on Draco's desk, a vision of daunted savior. "You're babbling."

"Okay! Sorry!" Potter breathed, then took a deep breath, and pulled himself up off the desk, lifting his hands and going to stand closer. Draco's breath was speeding for no reason, with butterflies rather than pure nausea starting up in his stomach. He was forced to stare up into those striking green eyes, as they narrowed into that dangerous tunnel vision that was so entrapping in turn, that single-minded intensity Potter could turn on him like the most powerful spell he knew, not that Potter knew he knew it. *Why do you think I never want to be alone with you, Potter? You always stand too damn close-*

"Draco, do you want to go to the Yule Ball together?"

Draco had to have misheard him. "What- together? You mean you and me? You're asking to take me- you, Harry Potter, take me, Draco Malfoy, to the ball, the Yule Ball." Potter nodded, with an obvious struggle to keep his composure and not look away. But he managed, and the power of those eyes remained on Draco, no matter how nonsensical the words were from their owner.

"You're joking, right?" Draco breathed, and Potter shook his head immediately. "Is this some kind of dare? From the Weasley twins or something? Are you serious right now?" Draco knew a couple of girls had asked Potter already, from Ron's mockery about it. Was Parvati Patil not one of them, for him to just say yes, close up shop, and leave poor unsuspecting Slytherins alone?

"What?" Potter pushed up his glasses. "No, what, why would you think... I mean it, Draco, please, will you come to the Yule Ball with me?"

It kept sounding no less wrong on those perfect pink lips, words meant for Ginny Weasley, Cho Chang, *some* girl, even Luna or Hermione- or if it was a boy, someone like Cedric Diggory, or a Gryffindor, any of them. Bisexual or not, it would be anyone in the world sooner than Draco. *Basilisk corpse*, he told himself.

"Have you lost your mind?"

"What? What do you mean?"

"You can't actually be asking me out," Draco said slowly. "Asking me to go be your date, and dance with you and all the other champions in front of the entire school-" He got a vivid mental image of himself trying to waltz with Potter, not moving about very much because Potter was terrible at it, just swaying and staring at each other, faces close- "That *would* be expected."

"I know," Potter said, radiating a hopefulness turning to hopelessness with every passing second. *Bisexual,* Potter had said, and if he hadn't said that one word, Draco would have

known he meant it as friends and turned it down with ease, not with this incoherent rambling that had Potter so bewildered in turn. Not that either of them had spent any time in this conversation with their shit together. "I know it would be like that."

"Are you under the Imperius curse?" Draco demanded, searching desperately for any explanation that made sense, because he knew the *future*, and Harry Potter actually liking him? The blue loop proved beyond a doubt that was impossible. "Is someone blackmailing you? Have they taken one of our friends hostage?"

Suddenly, the answer occurred to Draco. Bisexual or not, Potter was baffled because it had never occurred to him that Draco could see it as anything but a friend asking. "Or you just mean, you want to go as friends? Only friends? That's what you've been trying to say?"

Potter's eyes focused on him, long and plaintive, for a suspended moment, before his jaw set and he squared his shoulders. "Yes, Draco. That's what I've been trying to say. Friends."

"Oh, well, sorry," Draco said, relaxing, "I don't intend to go to the ball anyway, so..."

"So you wouldn't say yes if Cedric Diggory asked you?" Potter blurted, "Or, um, Charlie Weasley, or Theo Nott, or..." He trailed off, the determined strength he had put on his face falling away just as quickly, body swaying towards Draco's seemingly of its own accord. Draco could smell that cheap Muggle shampoo he used, grass and dirt and male sweat and a magic so strong in his veins it always seemed to give sharpness to Potter's scent, some potency only it had.

"Is there a reason we're still discussing this?" Draco sighed, and took Potter's hand, not quite knowing why. He was surprised to find it cold and clammy, and for Potter to let him draw it to him, taking it and turning it upside down to trace the heart line. *I have the shortest heart line Trelawney says she's ever seen.* Potter didn't let him for long, though, hand clamping down on his with a fervor that seemed to be pleading in a way his words couldn't.

"Seriously, Potter, how many people could you take to the ball if you wanted? A real date, not just a friend. Male, female, the whole school is your oyster, except people already taken, so you'll want to get a move on. Just sit down in the Great Hall tomorrow, look around, and pick. Get someone else to ask them for you, if it's too stressful-"

Potter used his hand to tug Draco half across the desk, leaning down to stare him right in the eye again, faces close, along with Potter's breath, his scent, his nearness, all palpable threats to the pretense Draco always had to keep up of not caring, not wanting. And he must have done a damn good job at it, because otherwise this was cruel by Potter, too damned cruel.

"Is it your parents? That you know they'll hear, so you can't go with a boy, let alone with me? If it's that, tell me, please, don't just play it off with false pride-"

"If there was a boy I wanted to go with, I would just go with him, and let my parents do whatever they wanted after. But there's no one I like, and I don't like things like the Yule Ball anyway. I had the Heart of Winter Gala at the Manor too many times already..."

Potter twisted his head to look at Draco's hair, looking at the S in the back, and Draco stopped breathing. "You- you're wearing the new clasp I gave you, though," he whispered plaintively, and the world narrowed to the sight of those lips-

Draco sat back, gaze jerking away. There was another eye just as wild as his: Crouch's, where he was stood in the doorway of the classroom, for who knew how long.

"Professor!" Draco exclaimed. Potter took his hand off the desk, but didn't freak out like Draco would have thought. "Professor, I was just about to get back to writing my lines..."

"Look around. This is detention, Potter," Crouch barked, "Not a *bedroom*," and a significant glance did get Potter sprinting out of the classroom, to leave Crouch staring at Draco with not contempt, or even his usual barely-veiled viciousness, but something new: assessment.

When Draco sat down with Hermione at their library table the next morning, she took one look at him and let out an indescribably frustrated noise. One of her hands jerked hard enough to rip half of her Transfiguration essay in two. She didn't glance at it, though, not even Draco raised his wand and quickly repaired it for her. "Striker?" he said in alarm, and she marched him into the Defense section without skipping a beat.

"So!" Hermione exclaimed, jabbing a finger into his chest. "So! I hear Harry asked you to the Yule Ball last night, *Frankenstein*!" Draco very much hoped no one was in the stacks nearby to hear her. "And that you said no! And not very *nicely*, either!"

"What, what does it matter?" Draco asked. "He was just asking me to go as friends." Hermione's face scrunched up petulantly. "It's true, he told me that!"

"He did?" Hermione asked, in a disbelief tinged over with despair, and then sank to the ground against the shelf, rubbing at her eyes like whatever awful dream this was, she wanted out of it.

"*Really*?" she said, looking up. When Draco tried to sit beside her, she made a threatening gesture that put a stop to that.

"Oh my *God*," she groaned to herself, only half-understandable. "Why? Why do I even try? Why are these my *friends*? Why *me*? Why do I have to care so much about these *blunderbusses*? After everything I've done to make this- *Hell!* Why couldn't I have just gone and studied all the time with some nice *Ravenclaws*?"

At Draco's first extra Potions lesson that night, Severus found him distracted, and got the story out of him soon enough. He listened to Draco's whole awkward tale, demanding the most minute detail Draco could recall, and stayed impassive throughout.

"What do you think, Severus?" Draco stared up pleadingly, almost wanting his godfather to lie to him. "Do you think he actually *meant* it, asking me? That he could have wanted us to

go together because he likes me back?"

Severus rolled his eyes. "Hardly, Draco. Your initial interpretation was correct. He clearly only meant it as an offer of friendship. Best you didn't get any ideas and embarrass yourself." He frowned, eyes going furtive and shadowed as he saw Draco stare down blankly at his reflection in the cauldron's dark murky failed potion. "It's for the best he isn't interested in you, Draco, believe me. My godson is far, far, *far* too good for a Potter."

Amortentia

Chapter Notes

> Hey guys! Thanks so much for all your thoughts and comments, they really mean the world. To answer some questions, yes, I have planned out exactly what will go down with Harry and Draco and when on my outline :) And as for why Draco avoids Narcissa? At first, it was to avoid her figuring out that he was "from the future", and he stuck to the habit, especially after he befriended Gryffindors and his family didn't approve.
>
> Anyway, enjoy! <3
>
> Playlist

Draco had feared things would be weird with Potter after his failed attempt to ask him to the dance, but things seemed to slide quickly to normalcy after that. Potter was acting no differently, so it must just have been a casual attempt to ask him as a friend, to avoid having to go with someone for real. He hadn't exactly gotten the feeling Parvati Patil was a love match for him last time. Draco'd had better chemistry back then with *Pansy*.

Pansy, for her part, rallied admirably by securing Blaise as her date. He was genuinely proud of her, unless it had been an attempt to make Draco jealous- or, for that matter, the Greengrass sisters, neither of whom Draco saw speak a word to Pansy until after the ball was over.

The Slytherins in Draco's year, in fact, seemed to sort out their Yule Ball situation with a relative lack of drama. Maybe because more of the Slytherins were noble purebloods used to these kind of formal events? They all arranged themselves by the 13th, leaving weeks before the Yule Ball: Draco with no one, a predictably unenthused Theo with Daphne, a surprisingly enthused Blaise with Pansy, and then a rather torpid Vince with Millie and Greg with Tracey.

The Gryffindors, though? The Gryffindors could only be described as a shitshow. Even with Draco's intervention as a neutral third party to help.

When not one but two people asked Draco out on Saturday, he figured that was his cue to get himself moving. Not to secure a date, but to be sure his friends were adequately provided for. Not Ron and Potter- if they didn't seem inclined towards the Patil twins, he could try and give them a push, but otherwise, the bad experience they both seemed to have had last time would be salutary. He couldn't in his right conscience deprive them of that chance at character-building. No, paternalistic as it was, it was his female friends he had to sort out- Hermione first, whether Krum would be again allowed to take her, and then Luna, whether she would go. As he could recall, he hadn't seen her at the Yule Ball. But she'd seemed to enjoy the

Malfoy gala so much, he would have to find someone, if not worthy of his cousin, at least who he felt comfortable trusting her with.

Hermione was the first item on the list. Maybe given the way things had ended up in the blue loop, he should be pushing Ron towards her. But instead, he sent a message to Krum to meet him at the pitch half past midnight for flying that night. Krum seemed unperturbed by the hour, and eager to get into the air. But as soon as they stepped into the broomshed, Draco pushed his body between Krum and the brooms. "So, why do you think there's no Ron tonight?"

Krum blinked. "Because it is too late?"

"No, I didn't ask him," Draco said, and hoped the late hour would keep Ron from catching wind and getting bitter. But he didn't like the way Krum visibly relaxed at the news. "Stop looking so relieved, Ron's gonna get over his hero worship thing for you and be more fun to be around-"

"He is still not very good at Quidditch," Krum said flatly.

"Wow, Viktor, thanks, great way to start this out and endear yourself to me," Draco sniped, feeling a defensiveness that was rather rich from the erstwhile author of 'Weasley is our King'. "No, put your broom away. We're staying in here where it's warm- Focillo- till we're done our little talk, and then we can go out and fly if you still want to. Or I still do. Might not, after."

Krum seemed to be drawing some invisible armor around himself, there in the shed's close dim light. "I have been afraid of this," he said, and drew his wand. "You might best me, Draco Malfoy, but you vill not best me easily."

"Hey, what the hell!" Draco yelped, jumping back. "Put that thing away. I'm not here to attack you like, what, Karkaroff must be putting in your ear? I'm just here to talk about the ball."

Krum winced, his broad heavy-browed face contorting in discomfort. "Um, vell, Draco, this is very flattering, and you are a very interesting person. But I already have someone I vant to ask."

Draco chose to breeze past Krum's mistake. He wasn't insulted by it. If anything, it was rather entertaining to be considered some kind of predatory homosexual. "Exactly. That's what I'm here about. Hermione."

Krum leaped back and hit his elbows hard against some school brooms. He didn't seem to feel the blow at all, in the wake of Draco's verbal one. "Vat- but- how did you know?"

"Do you really think you're subtle?" Draco said impatient. "Don't worry, I haven't heard anyone else figure it out, least of all her. And I haven't said anything until now."

For whatever reason, Krum seemed to think this the time to draw his wand again. "Yes, I admit it. I, erm, admire your friend very much-"

"No, not my friend. My *best* friend," Draco said, letting his tone and gaze darken, and Krum's hand almost seemed to shake where he held out his thick wand between them. "Do you know what that means, *Viktor Krum*?" He lingered over the syllables of Krum's full names in the manner of Severus, as if all kinds of vicious intimations could be read into that pronunciation.

"Are you trying to varn me to stay avay from her?" Krum asked warily. "But you are not liking girls, nein? So is it that you think me too old- too famous- too foreign- believe me, I have thought all of these things myself, but I cannot change it. She is the only girl in this school that interests me." He seemed disturbingly ready to unburden himself of his emotions, to a boy he still didn't trust enough to lower his wand. "I did not mean to like her this much. I noticed her because she is alvays vith Harry Potter, my rival, and Karkaroff told me to vatch Harry Potter and vat he vas doing. And somehow I came to be vatching Hermione instead." He hung his head in shame.

"I'm not saying you *can't* ask her, Viktor," Draco said with a shrug. "I'm no chauvinist. It's her decision who she takes, not mine. But it's *my* decision how to punish anyone who steps out of line, with the most important person in the *world* to me. Are you catching my meaning?"

"You are saying that I must be a gentleman," Krum said, and then scowled indignantly. "Of course I vould not be uncouth towards Hermione. She is a lady! She is a strong, passionate person I respect. I vant to get to know her better, talk to her, that is all. At the same table, for once."

"Okay," Draco said, and made the decision he had anticipated making. "You have my blessing, then, Krum. But two things. One, you should get a move on and ask her quickly, and do it with all the romance and ceremony she deserves, because you are absolutely getting the best girl in every single sense possible in our *wizarding generation.* And two, if I find out you so much as mildly displeased her- so much as *looked* at her funny, let alone treated her badly or made her cry-"

"I vould become your enemy," Krum said grimly. "And I have heard vat you do to your enemies. I understand. I could not be cruel to Hermione even if I vanted. I promise you." And then Draco let him at the brooms, and they went out for a very late December flight.

Thanks to Draco's intervention, Krum asked Hermione out just like in the blue loop, if maybe a bit earlier. Draco got to be there to witness the whole glorious awkwardness of it, though he had no reason to think Hermione would say no. But she would have no idea this was coming.

As Draco had arranged with Krum, Draco didn't go to the library first thing on Monday afternoon, or at least as far as Krum knew. He wished he had an invisibility cloak as he ran the promised interference, keeping an eye out to make sure none of their friends happened upon them, then went over and hid behind some shelves to listen. Krum had taken Hermione over to the much-ransacked section on dragons.

"Hello, my name is Viktor Krum."

Okay. Draco had heard more promising openings.

"I know who you are," Hermione's voice said, coming out unintimidated against a boy four years older, rich, famous, handsome, pureblooded, and with the world at his feet. But that was why Hermione was Draco's anchor. So much more than anyone else, even a Victor Krum, she knew exactly who she was. "I'm Hermione Granger. How can I help you, Viktor?"

"Hermione," Krum said, and Draco pumped his fist. All those many times spent going over and over that pronunciation had borne fruit. "Hermione, ve are not much acquainted, but I have seen you often in the library, vith your friends..."

"Well, yes, you sit nearby," Hermione said, and clearly had no idea what was coming, or else he hoped she wouldn't have launched into her ensuing tirade. "And to be honest, I know it's not your *fault*, Viktor, but it does make it rather harder to study, all the attention you attract- all the giggling girls and that-"

"I am sorry," Krum said, and when Draco pushed his face through the crack between two encyclopedias, he could see the big boy visibly deflating. "I am coming to the library to see you. I have been coming up to the library every day to try and talk to you, but I have not had the courage."

"To talk about what?" Hermione breathed, hand going to her chest. She was leaning back against the bookshelf, other hand toying nervously with the charms on her bracelet. "Me? What do you mean? You mean, about my friend, Harry Potter?"

"No, I do not vant to ask Harry Potter to the Yule Ball," Krum said, "I vant to ask Hermione Granger," and okay, anyone who said Quidditch stars were smooth with the ladies needed to be introduced to Viktor Krum.

"Oh, but- *I'm* Hermione Granger," she said, and only seemed to connect the dots after a second. The idea of a Quidditch star and Triwizard champion choosing *her* must seem that far out of the realm of possibility to her. "You're asking *me*?" Draco willed her not to ask why, to cut herself down. He wanted her to know how much she was worth, which was *everything*. Krum would be the lucky one, and Draco would be damn sure to make her know that.

"Yes," Krum said, and looked down bashfully, his massive frame seeming to contract in shyness. "I know ve are not vell acquainted. But I think you are a very smart and very lovely girl, and I vould like to take you very much, please."

Draco nearly burst out laughing at that, but at least Hermione didn't. Her hands had gone to her mouth, but not to cover giggles. Her face was red, and for that moment, she had gone from her usual bossy, infinitely capable young menace, to the flustered young giddiness of someone being chosen as special for the very first time.

Draco was the only one who could spoil this for her, as his presence drew attention. "Hello, Draco," Luna began, and Draco cast a quick Muffliato. Krum and Hermione didn't seem to have noticed, but his heart was still pounding as he gestured towards the crack between books.

"Who are we spying on?" she asked brightly, and clasped both of her own hands over her mouth when she saw it was Krum and Hermione, and heard what Hermione said.

"Well, yes- alright, then, I'll, um, I'll go to the ball with you if you'd like," Hermione said, very stiffly. She reached out and actually *shook Krum's hand*, before walking back over to her library table and burying her face behind the largest book Draco had ever seen on Blast-Ended Skrewts.

Luna and Draco were the unfortunate witnesses to Krum's celebration, as he punched the air twice and then did some kind of excited hand-flapping and jumping about in a circle. "Oh, my, how fascinating," said Luna. "Do all boys do that after they've successfully asked someone to a ball?"

Draco remembered his own reaction at asking Pansy and getting a yes. *Of course she said yes*, had been as far as he'd thought about it. *I* am *a Malfoy.*

"Not in my experience."

Finding a ball date, then, was off Hermione's list of difficulties, although getting her outfit for it ready posed its own set of problems. Draco offered his assistance, or rather his money, but she said she had it all covered, and in truth, he trusted her. He remembered not recognizing the smooth-haired, elegant Granger last time. But just to be sure, he made her promise to show him her intended look in advance, full out, for his approval. "You're going to be in front of the whole school, for the champions' first dance," Draco said. "You're not just representing yourself, you're representing *me*, as your best friend. I expect a turnout accordingly."

She also had reason to complain of Ron and Potter's laziness when it came to schoolwork and studying, figuring out the golden egg, and finding themselves ball dates. At least Potter had made an effort to secure one, albeit only as a friend. But Ron did no such thing, at least until Draco had the misfortune to experience the worst secondhand embarrassment of his entire existence.

Draco was going down from the library to the dungeons before dinner, and found himself passing through the entrance hall at exactly the wrong time for his own mental health. The entrance hall was only slightly less impressively decked out than the Great Hall with its twelve trees decked to the nines and everlasting icicles. There was a winter wonderland dominating the path to the steps, with more everlasting icicles hung overhead all about, and an enchanted silver mist like snow hovering in the air everywhere. Blue and white fairy lights came on every afternoon a bit before dinner. Maybe it was that added bit of winter romance in the air that spurred Ron Weasley on to the most misguided piece of Gryffindor bravery on record.

Fleur Delacour was at the epicenter of one of the lovely bursts of snowy silver mist, highlighting her Veela heritage to full effect in her powder-blue Beauxbatons robes, and even Cedric Diggory seemed to fade in magnetism beside her. Ron was coming inside with Neville, Seamus, and Dean, but he stopped dead at that arresting sight. Draco called out a hello as he passed. When Ron didn't answer, Draco turned back around, and nearly had a heart attack at the sight before him: Ron striding up to Delacour with the same queasy determination on his face as he faced his Potions finals each year. Except in this examination, Draco could do nothing to help him.

"Fleur," Ron blurted, and Draco began walking over as rapidly as he could, but it was too late. "Fleur, do you wanna go to the ball with me?"

Delacour didn't even respond, just turned from Cedric, eyes narrowing, and eyed Ron up and down like a horse had risen up on its hind legs and tried to invite her to tea in its stall. Her gaze was blank enough that she clearly didn't recognize him, despite him being best friends with another champion, and despite her status as *his eventual sister-in-law*. The entire entrance hall had heard Ron, so loudly had he bellowed out the words like a challenge to a duel. A low tittering went around as Delacour just stood there and Ron's face went from foolhardy bravado to frozen horror. Then Ron turned to flee. Draco put a hand on his shoulder, an anger rising in him that he had never thought he would feel, watching the humiliation of *Ron Weasley*.

"Ce type vous a pose une question," Draco said loudly, and forced himself to stick despite his agitation to the polite third-person formal you. "Allez-vous répondre, Mademoiselle Delacour?"

Delacour's gaze went from bewildered and squeamish to defensive. "Je le connais pas."

"Mais vous *me* connaissez, Mademoiselle. Non? C'est Ron Weasley, et c'est *mon ami*," Draco said, pushing his voice into the most courtly refinement there could be, the poshest pronunciation of his French. "*Mon ami* Ron Weasley mérite une réponse à cet égard aujourd'hui."

Delacour's face turned petulant, but somewhat cowed. "J'y vais déjà avec Roger Davies."

"Alors c'était si compliqué?" Draco asked with exquisite sarcasm. "Dis-lui que vous êtes engagé d'autres obligations, remerciez-le de le prosper et dire au revoir."

Delacour struggled to compose herself for a moment. Like Severus said, Draco was certainly making friends this year. "Bonsoir, Ronald," she finally said in her most polite manner. "I am very 'onored to be asked, but I 'ave a date already. I am sorry. Best wishes and au revoir."

Draco nodded, pulled Ron away, and turned as he left to give her a teethy sort of a smile. He could see Cedric Diggory staring after him with more dislike than ever on that handsome face. But hey, maybe beautiful people like him and Delacour *needed* to be taught a lesson or two.

Ginny came over and began to laugh, poking at Ron and giggling, and insisted he tell the whole story to Potter once he arrived. Draco sat at Gryffindor for once, in an attempt to console Ron, feeling genuinely awful for him, despite what his limited intervention had accomplished.

In response to the question whether he'd asked anyone, Potter glanced quickly at Draco, then muttered something noncommittal. "So you don't have anyone to go with either?" Ron said glumly. "This is mad we're the only ones left who haven't got anyone- well, except Neville."

"Um, actually, Draco," Neville said, "That reminds me, can I talk to you about something?"

"Oh, Neville, I thought you'd never ask," Draco drawled, giving him a half-lidded look up through his eyelashes. The Weasleys nearby descended into hysterics, while Potter just stared more heavily at his own hands.

Neville had to really want to talk to him to follow him to the Slytherin table, even this far before dinner. Somehow, though, Draco wasn't sharp enough to guess what he was about, until he blurted, "Er, Draco, do you think it would be alright if I asked your cousin Luna to the ball?"

Draco considered, thinking not just about how fit Neville was going to get, and all the Basilisk-slaying in the future, but also how universally kind Neville had always been, to himself and others. He'd only ever wounded Draco through avoidance, and that had been born of fear. And apparently, he wasn't scared of Luna. "Do you like her, then? Is that what this is about? Or have you just already run through all the girls in your year, and she's the only option left that you know?"

"I... I think she's really cool," Neville said, and looked like he wished he had some sort of weapon like the sword of Gryffindor to place between himself and the fearsome Draco Malfoy.

"You don't need my permission," Draco sighed, "Though I can't promise you success. And as long as you don't act like a jerk or do anything awful to her, you don't have to worry about any of my retaliation either."

"Okay, good, I really don't want to, erm, force your retaliation," said Neville, and fled.

Draco actually expected Neville to be successful, if only because any fourth-year was Luna's ticket to the ball. He was nonplused to find Neville arriving at the library the next morning, glumly telling Ron that he could wear his dress robes to the Yule Ball, if his were really so bad, because Neville wouldn't have anyone to go with anyway. "Luna said no?" Draco asked, and got a crushed sort of nod that showed how much Neville must have been hoping she would say yes. Maybe an actual crush there. Luna could do worse. There wasn't a mean bone in Neville's body.

"Just ask Ginny," Draco said, and ignored the sputtering gasp that drew out of Ron.

Luna hadn't been at breakfast, which he had just attributed to her sleeping in on the weekend now that term was officially over. But she wasn't at lunch or dinner, so Draco abandoned his fellow Slytherins and went down to the kitchens. She wasn't there either, but Dobby told him that Luna had stopped by at midday and gotten Dobby to give her a colossal quantity of food in a basket, as if preparing to hibernate for the winter. "How did she seem?" he asked Dobby.

Dobby confined himself to describing Luna's swollen eyes, and the moderate but worrying description of, "Luna Lovegood was not her usual self."

So Draco had officially fucked up by giving Neville the green light to ask out Luna. He didn't think Neville would have been at all aggressive or nasty at taking the rejection. So he had to

assume it was something else about the asking, or the Yule Ball, or something he didn't know about. But it was maddening not to know. Ever since he'd found Luna alabaster-white and cold in the Chamber of Secrets thanks to his alterations of the blue line, he had felt responsible for her, in a way that made his skin crawl when he didn't have any idea where she was.

He was shameless enough to go over to Gryffindor and commandeer Potter in the middle of dinner. Ron asked crankily if it couldn't wait until after dinner, and Draco said, no, it couldn't. Hermione asked what it was about. Draco couldn't exactly yell out Potter's secrets, and he didn't want to admit something that Luna was the one involved in front of so many listening ears. So he just said, "It's just about who's going with who to the Yule Ball," without saying *Neville and Luna.*

After that, Potter proved surprisingly willing to drop everything, even his fully-piled plate, for Draco's summons, following him around the corner with a smile dawning on his face. Maybe he could guess which couple was in need of help. "Okay, I need the Marauder's Map for Luna," Draco blurted, and he had never seen anyone's face fall apart so quickly or completely.

"What- *that's* why you had to talk to me?" Potter asked plaintively, staring at Draco like he was a horrible person. It was a look he gave surprisingly infrequently to Draco in the red line. It made Draco especially uncomfortable right now, without knowing why.

"Yeah, it's the bloody Yule Ball, like I said. Neville asked Luna to the Yule Ball, and I think it's upset her somehow, because she hasn't been at meals and I haven't seen her around all day... what did you think I needed, Potter?"

"Nothing," Potter said quickly, and dug around in his bag. He happened to have it on him, and handed it over. "Just give it back when you have the chance."

"Thanks, Potter." Draco tapped the parchment. "I solemnly swear I am up to no good."

He searched the map, and found Luna Lovegood a small solitary dot out by the lake. When he looked up, Potter was still right there, looking at him. Draco couldn't figure out why. Potter took a deep breath, like he was about to say something, but didn't. "Luna's at the lake," Draco said, and gave him another weak smile as he brushed past him on his way to his cousin.

Once he knew her rough location, he could find her with ease even without the Marauder's Map, just by the glow of her hair. She was in the spot they always sat out here, the same place where Dobby had found the tower in Potter's cup. Luna's presence was so large and at times otherworldly, it was easy to miss how small and young she really was. But he felt it now in the dusk, with Luna just as undefended as he from the December wind. It hadn't snowed yet, but the impending promise of snow could be felt in the air. Draco hastened his step to cast a warming spell on her. He whispered it under his breath, but she still said, without turning, "Hello, Draco."

"How did you know it was me?" Draco said, taking off his cloak to drape it around her shoulders, and casting a warming charm on himself and then the ground before sitting beside

her.

"Oh," Luna said, "There's a feel to your magic different than anyone else's." Her gaze didn't shift from the long dark prospect of the lake before them.

"More powerful?" Draco asked, trying to be funny, but Luna didn't laugh.

"Darker," she said absently, and pulled his cloak tighter around herself, as the wind blew the winter air right in their faces. "And no, Draco, I don't want to go inside. I can give back your cloak."

"That's okay," Draco lied. "I'm not cold at all. Luna, I just wanted..." He didn't know how to approach this, with an air about her so remote and alien it chilled Draco worse than the wind. "I don't mean to be all overprotective cousin man, but you weren't at any meals, and Dobby said..."

"I ate earlier," Luna said, pulling her knees up tight to her chest, and rested her chin on them to stare out the lake. Her very long hair at least gave her some form of wind shield. She pulled Draco's cloak all about her as another shield, though with how long she could have been sitting out here, he didn't know how much it would help. "Don't worry, Draco. I've just been thinking."

In Draco's own experience, at least, that was not a great sign. "Wanna tell me what?"

Draco feared Luna would do something she never had, and send him summarily from her side, but this was Luna. Either she felt some burden of a debt towards him after the Chamber of Secrets, or she was as incapable of unkindness as Neville. Luna just looked at him for the first time, considering, and then said, "I think you'd understand."

Draco's heart was pierced by the sight of her tears, because come to think of it, he'd never actually seen her cry before. Her face had already been swollen from crying before, like Dobby had said, and now more tears were flowing. At least it was not quite cold enough for them to freeze there on her little face.

"I won't say anything about it at all, if you don't want," Draco offered, and lifted his arm, offering it as shelter. She snuggled beneath it, and Draco wrapped it there tightly. The wind seemed slightly more bearable if they were sharing warmth, though they both looked back out at the lake instead of each other. "I won't try to tell you what to do, or give advice unless you ask for it. I won't act like I know better, I promise. I'll just listen, that's all."

She pulled her hair as a tighter curtain around her face, and said without expression in her voice, "I've been having more dreams about Tom."

Luna was so good at acting like her first year hadn't affected her, so good at making a joke or a non-issue about what she had experienced with Riddle's diary, that it hadn't even occurred to Draco as a potential stumbling block for anything romantic. The memory cut through Draco then, though, and made him feel like the worst cousin in history. "What kind of dreams?"

"Not good ones," Luna said, without any attempt to hide her tears. When Draco stole a glance at her, he could see her tears darkening his robe where it was pulled over her knees. "Memories, mostly, I suppose. Not of things that happened, mostly. Just things Tom and I talked about. Things he promised. I try to joke about it, but... I really *was* in love with him, I think. Back then. I just had no one else. No one."

It was a fight not to say anything. But he owed it to her to just listen, the way he had promised. He tightened his hold on her shoulders. She moved her face back from where she had been burying it in her own knees, and buried it in his shoulder instead. This close, he could hear the facade of eerie stoic calm was not complete, as she sniffled every now and then between words, if only from the cold.

"Neville asked me to the Yule Ball last night. I didn't think anyone would, though I would have liked to go. I enjoyed the Christmas Eve gala last year with you, even if you were blinded by a curse, and we did end up in the dungeons." Draco snorted in surprised laughter, and he caught a flash of her silvery blue eyes smiling up at him before she pressed her face to his shoulder again.

"I wanted to say yes to Neville," she mumbled against his shoulder. "And not just to go to the ball. He's a very nice boy. He's cute. And he's always been so kind. I thought we would have a good time. And I wanted to make him happy. But I just couldn't say yes, I couldn't, and I didn't know why, so I ran. And when I got to the lake last night, I saw Tom in the water." Draco made a sound of alarm. "Not *really*, Draco. I know he's dead, the diary's destroyed. But when I looked down at my reflection on the water, he was there behind me, in my ear, whispering promises..."

She let out a harsh stifled sob. "I was so scared, Draco, I don't know why I got so scared... but when I think of dancing with a boy, any boy... Tom said we would go dancing together, go to balls, he told me about the Heart of Winter gala at Malfoy Manor, and said he would have taken me there if we were born in the same time... no, Draco, don't give me that face, don't say you're sorry, you couldn't have known when you invited me, and I didn't think of him the *entire* time... I was *glad* to go with someone else and get those pictures of Tom out of my head. But you're the only boy I can *trust*- when I thought of dancing with Neville, being his date, having him *touch* me, I *couldn't*-"

"Luna," Draco said forcefully. "You didn't have to. You don't have to let any boy ever touch you, your whole life, or any girl either. Unless you want to. If people tell you that's not normal, then they're the sick, fucked-up ones." He was breaking his own rule, but he couldn't not say it.

"I did want to, though," Luna said bleakly, and rubbed her face into his shoulder, nuzzling it with all the tears coming off on his shirt. "I think I could like Neville. Neville if no one else. He's so *good*. If I can't feel comfortable even *thinking* of Neville, how will I ever, with *anyone*- I used to want that, so much, growing up, to fall in love, and then I *did*..."

She began to sob, unrestrained, and Draco had never felt so guilty in his life, not even when he thought his intervention had earned Sirius the Dementor's Kiss. Because if he'd left it alone, this would have been Ginny Weasley and not her. And Ginny back then wouldn't have been half so alone, not just a little girl with an ancient monster- two ancient monsters.

"I've never told anyone this," she said with a sob, "*Please* don't tell anyone... I used to write about all the things I would do if he was real... you know, if he had a body..."

"Corporeal," Draco supplied inanely, and she nodded.

"If he was corporeal," she gasped, "I would talk all the time about wanting to hold his hand or hug him. Just because I missed my father so much, and no one touched me back then. No one talked to me or even looked at me more than they had to, except to laugh at me. And I wanted to make friends, so badly, like Father told me to, but I didn't know *how*. And each time I was sad and said I needed a hug, Tom wrote that he was hugging me. And I don't know why, I started writing I wanted to kiss him, I would say that to him all the time. He said I was way too young, even once I turned twelve, but that when I got to be fifteen like him, he would show me things. He promised. I heard girls in my dorm talking about sex, how it worked, and I told him I wanted him to teach me-"

Draco felt like he was going to be sick. At least she said Riddle hadn't played into it too much. But even how much he had made Draco want to find whatever remained of that diary and bring it back to life to kill it again. "Luna, that's normal when you're in love. Even if you're super young, if you like someone a lot, you'll get curious, even if you don't know what it means-"

"I did, though," Luna said, with a deep shuddering breath, and hid her face in her own hands before breathing out what sounded her most shameful secret. "The girls in Ravenclaw- what I would hear them say- and I still think about him like that, I still *dream*- I can't help but think of him, he's still in my head, all the time- it's so wrong, I feel like *dirt,* Draco, and I never wanted anyone to know, not *you*, you've been so kind- you've given me friends, you've let me pretend to be your cousin, when I'm this ruined *thing*- when I know I'm sullied to be any good anymore, I'll never be any good ever again-"

"Luna!" Draco shouted, pulling her hands off her face. "Don't you dare. Don't you dare say you're sullied or ruined, you're *not.* I know how that feels, alright? I know how it feels to have so much dark in your past, you feel like you're neck-deep in filth and no one would ever want to touch the face they see, if they knew what everything below it is caught in- I know how it is to feel your skin is like poison and other people must be blind not to see it, like the things you believed in turned you to something irredeemable. I know how it feels to think you're too ruined to be any good for anyone else anymore- but that's not *you*, Luna, you're so sweet, you're so *smart*, you *are* good, you're *so* good- you're the least sullied person I've ever met, *please*, Luna-"

"Draco," she said curiously, touching his face, "Draco, why are you crying too?"

"I should have saved you sooner," Draco gasped, hugging her as tightly as he could. She wrapped her own arms around him, distant devastation at last giving way to, of all things, her own need to comfort him. "I can't stand it if you think that, Luna, I can't stand it- I know you might feel it, but don't think it, not without telling your own head you're wrong-"

"Do you do that, Draco?" Luna asked with a shuddering laugh. "Do *you* tell your mind it's wrong when you think awful things about yourself?"

"No," Draco laughed unsteadily, "No, I don't, I know I'm a hypocrite, but Luna- if you want me to, I'll try, if you say you will. He could have come to life as a person and done *anything* to you, and I still wouldn't call *you* dirty. Whatever *he* is, he didn't taint you, didn't change you, not *you*. You're the kind of person who could climb down into hell and back out and still not have your brightness dimmed. Your light- I know it would be the same, because you've been like an angel to me, Luna, an *angel*- I need you more than you need me, you know that, don't you? You could spend a year in hell- fuck, I guess you *did*- you could spend a year in hell and still be no less an angel."

And finally, exhausted, he fell silent. And they sat that way for a while, together.

"Draco? Luna?" a voice behind them asked. Draco cast a Lumos to see. Then he looked up wiping his eyes, to see Harry Potter standing above them like another angel, in a dark puffy coat, with two more dark puffy coats in his arms. "I'm sorry to interrupt. I just- you never came inside, and I thought if you were going to stay out like this at night, you'd need a jacket-
"

"Give it," Draco said, and took the smaller-looking coat and demanded Luna hold out her arms. She put her arms in the sleeves, then let Draco put the coat on her. It was shabby enough that even if he hadn't seen Ron wear it, he would have known it was a Weasley's. He snapped all the clasps to close it, and took a scarf from Potter to wrap around her neck, before holding up his arms for another coat. Potter handed it down, and Draco had the same relief as Luna, even if it meant he'd had to once again expose his face to Potter. "Thank you, Potter."

It wasn't until Potter had left them alone, taking his map back with him, and Draco sat with Luna a little longer before heading in, that he realized the map had been with Draco until then. So to know they were still out and where they were, Potter had to have stayed in the entrance hall or Great Hall and waited all that time. Before their lack of return had made him go up to Gryffindor and get them coats and scarves.

Draco was in one of Potter's extra coats. He'd have to give that back, but he decided he'd keep the Gryffindor scarf, which had been in the coat pocket so he knew it was Potter's, and anyway, it smelled like him. He'd put it with the Gryffindor tie he'd stolen from Potter last year, and tell Potter the scarf was just lost. If he wanted, he'd buy him another one.

"Oh, and Luna," Draco suddenly remembered to say as they parted ways, "I'm not *pretending* to be your cousin. You proved we were on that family tree, remember? Just because it's not *first* cousins or something, it doesn't mean we're not still cousins. So don't ever say that again, you'll hurt my feelings. And in case you haven't noticed, I'm a very sensitive person."

"Okay, Draco," Luna laughed, and gave him a shaky but real half-smile before she left him.

Draco was left drained himself over the next day, though he still made sure to make an appearance at their library table, hugging Luna every time he saw her. He found it hard to focus that night at extra Potions with Severus, but at least he had some very interesting potions to distract him. The problem was what that distraction ended up teaching him.

"I have prepared a number of potions," Severus intoned, "That are considered standard for a NEWT-level student to be able to complete. When you have brewed every one of these potions to an excellent quality, then I will consider you *competent.* Now identify them. I will not tell you what they are, even if you are stumped. We can stay here all night if need be."

Ah, Severus's warm and fuzzy teaching style, who could beat it? Draco stooped over the first cauldron and felt the same mix of thrill and trepidation this potion always gave him.

"Veritaserum," he blurted. This he had actually brewed before. In the summer after Dumbledore's murder, the Death Eaters had set Draco to filling their stores of it, with Severus far too busy and important to do it. He had failed at it so many times in a row back then, he'd thought they would call Severus in to do it instead. But Aunt Bella had just taken it upon herself to personally punish each failure, and it hadn't taken many more tries to get it right.

"Veritaserum," Draco repeated, and gestured to the muddy one beside it and said, "Polyjuice Potion" with ease. This was made even easier by the similarity to a presentation Slughorn had given at the start of sixth year. It made unfortunate sense for Severus to judge Draco to be at the Potions level of a sixth-year. He had been rather distracted in Potions, from the start of sixth-year onwards.

"And this?" Severus asked, gesturing to a high-bubbling dark gold potion. Draco's face soured as he remembered how hard he had tried to win it at the start of sixth year, to help with his mission for Voldemort, and how Potter of all people had been the one to win instead.

"Felix Felicis," Draco said, managing to keep the annoyance off his face.

"And the last?" said Severus, not looking impressed by Draco's feats so far.

Draco approached the cauldron with its lighter pearly gold contents, set a bit apart from the others because of its strong smell, and finally let the whiff of Amortentia hit his nose. He remembered it smelled differently based on what attracted you. He could smell a confusing array of aromas, with broomsticks, fresh-cut grass, sweat, a cheap-smelling Muggle shampoo, and a sharpness of powerful magic palpable in the air, so strong it was not just a feeling there but a scent-

The smell of Harry Potter, he realized, and wasn't even that surprised. It was just like seeing Potter in the Mirror of Erised. What was surprising was that when he searched his memories of sixth year, he found that even back in the blue loop, Amortentia had smelled exactly the same.

As if none of this suffering was new. As if he had *always* been in love with Potter.

Draco staggered back from the cauldron, covering his nose and putting as much distance between himself and it as he could. Severus cleared his throat, so Draco answered. "Amortentia," he said, "It's Amortentia," and stopped being able to breathe.

Severus could recognize one of Draco's panic attacks easily by now, and administered a draught of peace at once, with Valerian root tea not long in following. He sat with Draco in

that classroom for an hour, far from the scent of Amortentia, and said little, his face unmistakably guilty. But he had done nothing wrong.

No one should be that broken by the realization of what they had always wanted.

If Draco had seen the Mirror of Erised in the blue line's first year, he probably would have seen Potter in it back then as well.

The Yule Ball

Chapter Notes

Playlist

Dear Dragon-Face,

Are you sure you want to skip the Yule Ball? I hope it isn't just because you're gay. And if I've already told you how impressed I am that you've come to understand and accept that about yourself, so much sooner than I could ever accept I was bisexual, then I'm saying it again. There's no law that says you can't take a boy as your date, and I don't think anyone would dare give you too much shit about it. And however you attend, with a boy, girl, or alone, I think your absence would be very dearly felt by at least one boy or two, who would dearly miss the chance to have danced with such a dashing young man's nephew.

Remus has gotten sentimental, thinking about balls and dances and that uncertain time of school crushes. Not that we ever got a ball. But we've been practicing some waltzing together, in solidarity with you poor sods.

We've been giving Harry some tips by the mirror, though there's only so much we can communicate through that. Harry's going to be up there in front of the whole school. I know that if you're anything like me, you'd have had etiquette classes since before you could walk. So maybe if you could spare some time, give Harry some in-person lessons.

And if there is someone you want to ask to the ball, Draco, just ask him. Life is too short. I want you to have everything that Remus and I have, before it could be too late. There has never been a feeling in my life half as good as being with Remus and knowing he believes in me. Not even the feeling of escaping from Azkaban.

Sincerely,

Your Grim-Faced Uncle

Draco maintained his intention to avoid the Yule Ball at all costs. The news that Ron and Potter had secured the Patil twins as dates only reaffirmed his belief that everything would go perfectly fine now without his intrusion. But he changed his mind on Christmas Eve, after Luna found out that Neville had asked Ginny Weasley.

Luna was surprisingly sad. "It's so stupid of me," she said, with a distant sigh. "I wanted to go with him, but I couldn't. So I should be glad he found someone else to go with him."

"It's not stupid," Draco said automatically, and Luna gave him a sideways look.

"Don't just support me blindly," Luna said, one of the most hypocritical things he had ever heard from a person. As if Luna wasn't guilty of that with Draco, so much more. But he let it slide.

"Okay, it's kind of stupid," Draco conceded. "But it's not your fault you're too troubled still by what happened with the diary to go on a date with a boy. You wanted to go to the ball, and you're a third-year, so you can't-" Draco was seized by sudden inspiration, and tugged Luna away from their table into the stacks, where Viktor had taken Hermione. "Luna, wanna be my date?"

Luna stared at him blankly. "But you're gay," she said slowly, "And I'm your cousin..."

Draco just laughed. "As friends, Luna. You can take someone just as a friend. Potter tried to. It can be just like at the Heart of Winter gala. We know it doesn't freak you out with me, because I'm your gay cousin and you don't feel any threat from me. What do you say, Luna? I'll get Mother to send you something to wear."

Luna had lit up at first, but then she looked doubtful and guilty. "I had hoped for that from the start," she said hesitantly, "When I heard there would be a ball. That it could be like last year. But I wanted you to have the chance to have an actual date. And then you kept saying how much you didn't want to go at all, and I didn't want to impose..."

"Luna," Draco lied, "There's no one I want to take *romantically*. And I've suffered the Yule Ball once, I can do it again." Damn it, thinking about his feelings for Potter made him scatter-brained. He wracked his brain for a way to explain what he said, and deeply resented his blue loop-based Langlock for not protecting him from these slips of the tongue. "How many times do you think my family has held our own Yule Ball on Christmas Eve?"

Luna didn't blink at his explanation. "Then I'd love to go with you, Draco! Do you really think your mother would help me again?"

Mother did, and Severus had hardly ever looked more put-upon than when Draco and Luna came rushing into his chambers after Christmas Eve dinner. To their elated announcement that Mother's owl had promised to send Yule Ball outfits by Floo to Severus, Severus made grumbling noises about having not updated his Floo connection after Draco destroyed his first fireplace. But eventually he yielded, and went over to the fireplace to await Mother's hand-over, while Luna turned to Draco quizzically. "You blew up Professor Snape's fireplace?"

"Er. Well. I swear it seemed like a good idea at the time."

"Cool," Luna said happily.

The box flew through in a few minutes, elegantly wrapped even though it wasn't an official Christmas present. Draco let Luna open it, and found that Mother had outdone herself, giving them matching outfits that Father and Mother had worn to the Christmas Eve Gala maybe seven, eight years ago, long enough that Draco didn't think that anyone would recognize them

on him and Luna. But Draco didn't want to chance it, so he didn't want to get dressed in his dorms.

He prevailed upon Severus to let them get ready in his rooms, on the rationale that Luna wasn't very popular with her Ravenclaw dormmates. That had the pleasant side effect of sneaking in sideways an invitation to Luna for their Christmas morning.

"Nearly the entire school has stayed this year," Severus scowled. "I will not be having a celebration with the Slytherins this year. Nor had I expected you to come, let alone your cousin."

"But you still have your firefly tree, don't you?" Draco prodded. The innocuous mention sent Luna into such excitement, Severus had no choice but to give in and invite them.

Christmas morning dawned with presents at the foot of his bed, from Mother and Father as well. Mother had given him a set of ten white gold chains, to put the dragon charms she had given for his birthday on. Father had given him a large Malfoy genealogy book, which Draco would re-gift to Hermione. She'd be fascinated by it, even if Father's intentions with it were obviously negative.

He saved them to open with Severus and Luna, though, and took them wrapped up to Severus's chambers, where he had the singular pleasure of awakening Severus like a child in some commoner family on Christmas morning. Luna wasn't there yet, but she arrived before Severus had finished grousing, complaining, and going off and getting ready. She had braided her long mane of hair, had earrings on with real holly growing from them, and wore robes of brilliant crimson red, which she insisted upon two baleful glares was Christmas and not Gryffindor red.

Severus made them some mouthwatering spiced hot cocoa, and then suffered them to run up to the foot of his tree under its ethereal green glow and attack the presents, of which Draco and Luna each added an armful. Luna was excited to be the one to distribute them.

"I haven't had more than one person to celebrate Christmas with since my mother died," she said, and presented Severus, to his astonishment, with a present from Luna herself.

"I know you stunned me and tried to get our cousin Sirius killed," she said airily. "But you did save him as well, and so I thought I should get you something to thank you."

"A stress ball?" Severus asked once he opened it, reading its description with astonishment. "Charmed to give stress to the owner?"

"No, to relieve it," Luna said proudly. "It's not charmed, it's a Muggle invention. Hermione gave me one during exams last year. I ordered one custom from Muggle post. I thought you could enjoy it, sir." Which was a lovely way of saying Severus was a prick, and this might calm him down.

Severus turned it over doubtfully in his palm, a simple pale blue canvas ball with the word Anodyne written on it. "A cure for all ills," he mused, and squeezed it upon instruction. It

compressed slightly, and more so when he squeezed harder. "Ah. Thank you." He seemed genuinely almost speechless.

"You're welcome!" Luna exclaimed. "Here, Draco, here's yours from me! I saw this and thought of you." Draco opened the metallic navy package and found a thick copy of *Manifestos of the Great Gellert Grindelwald.* Draco was pretty sure this book was not just banned from the Hogwarts library, including the Restricted Section, but every library in the country. Draco thanked her with genuine enthusiasm, and tried not to see what look that gift put on Severus's face.

From Draco, Severus received a larger present, which turned out to be a tapestry, exactly the right size to be hung in front of the black spot on the wall, destroyed by Fiendfyre and Draco. "Thought it would add some visual interest." He had thought long and hard about what would fit in with the otherwise sparse decorations of Severus's stone chambers, and what would appeal to Severus's sensibilities enough not to just chuck into the working fireplace like poor Lockhart's golden roses. Eventually, he had settled upon an image of a silver doe wandering deep in a great gnarled dark wood.

Severus stared at it for so long, face so open and vulnerable, that Draco feared he'd made a grave miscalculation. But then Severus took the hanging rod, applied a powerful sticking charm, and put it up right then and there in front of the wrecked fireplace. He said not a word after he came back, just gestured for Luna to get on with the presents.

From Severus, Draco also received a book. This one was a copy of *Advanced Potion Making*, but worn and used. "I was looking through old texts," Severus informed him, "To find some for you to use in our future lessons, and stumbled upon *my* old textbook from sixth-year. It was just sitting there with the other books. Best it never fall into the wrong hands." Draco paged through it, saw Potions recipes annotated with corrections, and understood it as the treasure trove it was.

Draco had asked Luna to wear the necklace he'd given her today. He had a new chain for it, after confessing that he had simply bought the diamond chain the Sleeping Beauty turquoise resided on. "Hermione says gifts are better when you've made them yourself," Draco said, "So this is a revision, to make it entirely homemade. You can hang it off the diamond chain still if you want, or you can use this." Luna squealed, and insisted Draco take off and then put back on her necklace, the spiral light blue charm hanging from the new transfigured Byzantine chain of rose gold.

But the best presents were the ones Severus saved until the end: wrapped around with a golden ribbon, two vials of onyx black. "What's inside them?" Luna asked, and aside from the way Severus had been handing draught of peace out like candy since he learned of Draco's respiratory fits, the concealment made Draco sure it was something far more potent.

"Unstopper it," Severus said carefully, "And see for yourself. I only ask that you keep these amongst yourselves, do not use it in any sports or exams, and give none away to *Gryffindors*."

Draco didn't even have to identify it for them. "Oh, Merlin! It's Felix Felicis!" Luna exclaimed. "Father did a whole article series about how it was a hoax!" At Severus's

thunderous expression, Luna added, "But I don't think it is. Thank you so much, Professor!"

"Yes," Draco said slowly. "Thank you." It was an astonishing gift. And yet Draco already knew exactly when, how, and why he planned to use this potion. "Now, Severus, I think it's about the time Luna hears the story of how Salazar Slytherin ruined Christmas at Hogwarts..."

In a normal year, there would only be one great table for Christmas dinner, and Draco could have sat with the Gryffindors or Luna or Severus. Instead, he was left staring sulkily in their direction. The only one brave enough to venture into dialogue with him at his table was Krum.

"Are you going to the Ball?" Krum asked him, and his yearmates all looked over when Draco said he was, Theo's ears seeming to grow to twice their size as he leaned in. "Did you find a boy to go vith?"

"No, I'm just going with my cousin Luna," Draco said, and waved a hand at Luna at Ravenclaw to indicate her to him. "You're the only one with a romantic date, Krum."

That made him blush. "Vell, I am sorry you have not found a nice boy, Malfoy."

Draco chuckled, trying to ignore Pansy's death glare, and reached out. "Here, Krum. Let's have us some Christmas crackers." He only remembered halfway through his lot of them, at Theo's amused side-eye, that he had previously passionately declared them as only suitable for commoners.

After Christmas dinner, Draco, Luna, and Hermione went down the stairs to have Christmas with Dobby. Dobby seemed very busy, but he was overjoyed to see them, as he said he had a present for Draco Malfoy, just as he had with Harry Potter. When Draco opened it, he found... socks?

One was green and covered in silver snakes. The other was silver and covered in green dragons. "Dobby made them himself, Draco Malfoy!" Dobby enthused. "Dobby bought wool out of his own wages!"

Something twisted in Draco's stomach, as he reflected how much he would have scoffed at that in the blue line, without thinking about the fact that of all the presents Draco had bought, not a bit had been from his own money. 'His' money was all his parents', and so had the presents been, with the exception of items stolen from Hogwarts equipment and transfigured.

"Thank you, Dobby," said Draco, and took off his shoes and socks and resolutely put Dobby's on. "I'll wear them to the Yule Ball tonight."

Luna explained about going as Draco's date, and Hermione let out an indignant shriek at not having been told.

Luna had gotten Dobby a book on the history of tasseography. Hermione gave Dobby a knitted red hat that said she'd made herself over the summer, with craftsmanship in all honesty far inferior to Dobby's. And Draco had transfigured Dobby the smallest African turquoise watch imaginable, just the size for a house elf's spindly wrist, with a small clock-face grafted into the material- a difficult new skill. Dobby's eyes welled with tears as Hermione and Luna showed Draco the turquoise presents they wore from Draco, and told him they all were friends who matched now.

Hermione was less sanguine when they emerged from the kitchens, and she was faced with the prospect of getting ready for the ball. Draco told her to get everything and bring it to Severus's rooms. Hermione had some Sleak-Eezy hair potion that Draco was sure would serve her well, and didn't wilt at all at Severus's astonished glaring at finding her in his rooms.

"I would think you'd find it nice, sir," she said primly, "That we feel safe here, after the end of last year," and if Draco hadn't immediately stepped between, Draco gave it about a fifty-fifty chance that Severus would have unleashed his verbal venom and made Hermione cry on *Christmas*.

Severus absented himself, already as dressed up for the ball as he was going to get, and they all went to different rooms to change. Hermione didn't really start panicking until she saw Draco. "Oh my God," she said, looking instantly on the verge of tears. "You look so *expensive.* I'm going to be a laughingstock."

"You'll be with Viktor Krum, no one will be looking at *you*," Draco said logically, and got a bottle of Sleek-Eazy potion hurled in his general direction.

Once Hermione finished her little tantrum, he set himself about getting used to dressing in his father's shrunken clothes, walking in his father's shrunken boots, which covered Dobby's festive socks. The ball theme of the year these outfits were from, Draco recalled, was Marie Antoinette, that well-known, ill-fated witch from whom the Malfoys traced direct descent. There was less compunction about dressing like Muggles, it turned out, if the figure you were celebrating had only been in disguise as one, and these were ancient Muggles anyway.

Draco looked like an ancient Muggle now, dressed all in white with silver filigreed accents, and real diamonds sparkling all over the embroidery on the jacket and vest. There were liberties taken with history, of course. The fitted gray trousers he wore with the coat were tighter than the fashion, and it would have been something more like socks to go up to his knees over them, rather than laced-up gray suede boots. Nor was there a ruffle at the throat on the silk shirt. He left it unbuttoned at the top to show off his blue Swedish Short-Snout dragon necklace, on its new white gold chain.

He wondered why Mother had sent him these clothes, rather than normal sets of dress robes. Was it Father's order, continuing his streak of utterly dismal attempts at punishment? Was it a nod to Luna's eclectic tastes? Or had she genuinely thought these outfits would suit Draco and his date best, and put on the greatest show of Malfoy wealth and success, on a boy who was doing his best to disgrace the Malfoy name?

And then he saw Luna and didn't have to wonder.

Luna still hadn't finished getting ready, but the effect of the Marie Antoinette dress on her was genuinely stunning already. She would show up every girl at that ball, and if she hadn't earned Pansy's eternal enmity before, she would in *this*. It was toned down from the historical as well, naturally, with the great swell out of the skirts the same as any ball gown, not the larger, squarer Marie Antoinette look that Mother had shown Draco in pictures. And it was sleeveless like those dresses wouldn't have been, Luna's body wrapped in a tight bodice with a line of silver ribbon in bows down the front, and enough silver filigree and diamonds embroidered on it to probably buy the Burrow four times over. Draco's necklace finished off the look perfectly- save for the live holly earrings. They'd have to work on those. But with the long diamond tassel earrings and twin bracelets of white and blue diamond also in Mother's package, Draco had the perfect materials to do so.

Mother had done an incredible job shrinking the dress to fit a rough idea of Luna's proportions, on short notice at that. Either Mother had a soft spot for Luna, or she thought Luna had to be turned out extra-beautifully, to compensate for the flaws of the girl beneath the dress.

"You're like Cinderella," Hermione breathed.

She rolled her eyes when Draco and Luna asked in one voice, "Who?"

"You're like a Disney princess," Hermione said, only to pale when she looked at her own reflection. "And Draco's the prince in the fairy tale, and I'm the *ogre*."

"No, Hermione, you look so, so pretty," Luna said earnestly, and at her assistance, she and Hermione began to work on fixing each other's hair and make-up. Draco was of no help in that department, so he set about browsing through Grindelwald's manifestos until he was called to have his hair done in turn. He clasped his hand to his face and pronounced himself astonished by the fairytale transformation of his cousin and sister, even more drastic in a newly elegant Hermione in ethereal, glittering periwinkle-colored dress robes. Her hair was pulled back in a knot, while Luna's was braided into a crown around her head, spell-curled ringlets escaping around her face. "See, isn't Hermione pretty?" Luna beamed, and Draco nodded with all the enthusiasm in him.

Hermione and Luna admired the silver S clasp with the little emerald evil eye. "This is so lovely," Hermione said. "Did your mother buy it for you?"

"No, Harry did," Luna said, oblivious to Draco's throat-cutting gesture.

"You know," Hermione said with a sigh, as she set to work using the Sleek-Eazy potion on Draco's hair to add an extra shimmer and smoothness, "Harry hasn't gotten a chance to give you this year's Christmas present yet. He said he wondered if you would come to Christmas in Gryffindor-"

"How many times do I have to remind you all I'm banned from Gryffindor Tower," Draco sighed. "And we'll all exchange presents tomorrow, on Boxing Day, we settled that already."

"Oh, I know, just-" Hermione bit her lip. "You might have told him you were going to the Ball after all, you know. Instead of letting it be a surprise."

Draco shrugged. "He won't care."

Hermione was quiet for a while, fixing the back of Draco's chin-length hair into the clasp, and then said abruptly, "I think he will."

The final stumbling-block was Hermione's teeth, which she kept gazing at in the mirror and saying ruined the whole look. "I do look pretty," she wailed, "But only until I open my mouth!"

Draco recalled with sudden guilt the page in his notebook where he'd put down that a skirmish with Potter had gotten her caught in the crosshairs, at the wrong end of a tooth-growing Densaugeo jinx. She'd returned from the hospital wing with normal teeth, rather than the buck teeth she still had, and it was Draco's fault. "Maybe sometime you can have your teeth shrunken, Striker."

"My parents would never allow that," Hermione sighed. "They're dentists. Don't hold for magic being used on teeth-"

"I could do it," Luna interrupted brightly. "Right now, if you liked. I've done it several times before on teeth."

Hermione looked torn between doubt and hope, like this really could be a fairytale transformation for her tonight. "Could you really? Oh, Luna, please try, just be careful..."

"Are you sure you can do this?" Draco asked, and Luna nodded confidently. She was hard to defy when she was dressed this regally.

"Reducio!" Luna called, and immediately Hermione's buck teeth were shrinking. She moved on expertly to other teeth once they were done, and by the time she ended the charm, Hermione had a more perfect set of teeth than either of them. It was quite a startling effect for her face, bringing out the delicate latent prettiness he remembered in the blue loop. Draco hoped Krum would still like her without buck teeth.

"And it will stay like this?" Hermione breathed, staring in the mirror in disbelief. "It won't turn back at midnight?"

Draco and Luna exchanged confused glances. "Um, no?"

The three of them departed after eight, Draco insisting they be fashionably late. On the way up the stairs, Draco asked Luna, "You really did that spell on teeth before?"

"Oh, yes, lots," Luna said contentedly. "On loads of my dolls when I was young."

When they made it into the entrance hall, the doors to the great hall had already been opened, and all the students seemed to have settled in, except for the champions, who were standing with McGonagall beside the doors. Krum looked very downcast, but he brightened when he looked up and saw Hermione run over towards him. "Oh, Viktor, I'm sorry I'm late!" she exclaimed. "Draco said we should be fashionably late, I forgot about the champions'

procession- I'm sorry if I've held it up, oh, you look nice..." Smooth with the boys, Hermione Granger, that was her calling card. Maneater supreme.

"And you look... ah... erm..." Krum was unable to form sentences, but he seemed to like it.

All of the champions were staring at Hermione in disbelief, except for Potter, whose eyes had gone past Hermione. "Draco?" Potter called, and then ran over, ignoring the indignant call of a very pretty Parvati Patil in pink. Potter was in plain, traditional tuxedo-like dress robes, which suited him as distressingly well as Draco remembered. It had been Potter in those robes, his hair tamed for once, that had gone through Draco's head, when he had his first kiss with Pansy after the ball. He'd told himself it was out of annoyance at Potter for something or other. He should have known.

"Draco, what are you doing here? Didn't you say you wouldn't be caught dead at a meaningless mating ritual for children-"

"Luna couldn't come otherwise, she's a third-year." Draco gestured to his side.

Potter barely seemed to notice her there. "Then she could have just said yes to Neville... what are you even *wearing,* Draco?"

Draco shrugged, refusing to let himself or Luna wilt under the pressure of a gorgeous, inexplicably distraught Potter, who had abandoned his date as if she'd vanished into thin air. "It may be unusual, Potter," he drawled, "But you can't say it doesn't *suit* me. Really, though, I'm just dressed like this to match Luna. She is a vision, isn't she?"

Potter took a deep breath, hands gone to fists at his sides with what looked nothing like the Christmas spirit running through his veins. "Why didn't you- but, Draco, you said- if you were going to-" His voice, currently in the process of deepening with ongoing puberty, cracked twice in the attempt to speak. Then Parvati Patil yelled *Harry, come on!* loud enough that even Potter couldn't ignore her anymore.

So Draco took Luna's arm and made a break for it, as much from Potter as to get out of the way of the champions' processions. It did have the effect that being fashionably late often did, and gave them a dedicated audience. Voices went hushed all over the hall at the students' round tables, gazes whipping to process the sheer quantity of diamonds sparkling off Draco and Luna. Draco saw Neville Longbottom craning his neck so hard, he nearly fell out of his chair.

He let Luna take the lead, so she led him right over to a table of Gryffindors, with Ron and Padma, Neville and Ginny, Seamus and Lavender, and Dean and Fay Dunbar, who Draco had never spoken a single word to. Lavender and Fay looked to be having a much better time than the other girls, especially Ginny, who looked like she had already been miserable, even before her date almost broke his neck staring at another girl. Draco settled them between Dean and Seamus.

He made himself applaud the entrance of the champions, the way he hadn't in the blue loop. But it took everything in him to do it, with the sight of Potter with a pretty girl on his arm bringing up uncomfortable thoughts he'd strictly forbidden from his own mind. Thoughts

about Potter asking him to be his date, and whether if Draco said yes, that really would have been Draco there beside him, getting to touch him arm-in-arm for the whole walk. Looking close at those green eyes not for just a meaningless confrontation at the start of the ball, but for the entire night. Would Potter really have gone through with it? Surely he would have lost his nerve and found a girl instead, or at least a boy who was a less controversial choice. He told himself it never would have actually been him in the first place. It was like Severus said. All Draco had done by saying no was saving himself from embarrassing himself.

Draco barely had eyes for the decorations with a nervous-looking Potter walking past towards the high table, looking as unhappy to be there as his date was happy. Draco caught a sight of Ron out of the corner of his eye, staring over the same way, in clear, ugly jealousy. Draco forbade himself from looking at Potter again, all night if possible. He couldn't bear to think he looked the same as Ron did, that much like an unwanted toy.

Finally, the champions settled at the round high table, with Ron adding, "My brother Percy's up there with them."

He laughed when Draco drawled, "Then we have to consider ourselves the lucky ones."

Draco couldn't resist stealing looks over at the champions' table, but he told himself he was just checking on Hermione. And she did seem to be having a good time, with Krum making an effort, more animated and conversational than Draco had ever seen him. Draco just hoped it wasn't Quidditch he was gesturing so enthusiastically about. It also gave Draco a chance to check on Karkaroff, and if he was doing anything nefarious with a chance sat so close to Potter. Which was an excuse to look, then, at Potter.

"Hey, you still with us?" Ron asked, waving a hand in front of Draco's face. "You've been spacing out staring up there all night." Luna nodded, looking unoffended.

"Just worrying about how Hermione's doing with Krum," Draco said, and Ron's face went as sour as ever at that.

"Yeah, I can't believe that, can you?" he groused, and Neville made a tentative noise.

"I don't know," Neville said quietly. "Don't they look very happy up there?"

"They don't!" Ron snapped, and slapped the table.

"Alright, Ronald, we'll pretend to agree with you," Luna said calmly.

It was déjà vu, living out all the same sights as another life, but from a different vantage point, his table almost all Gryffindor instead of Slytherin.

Dumbledore got rid of the tables once the students cleared them, and summoned a stage for the Weird Sisters, who Draco had spent half the night in the blue loop making fun of. The sight of them just made him nostalgic now. He'd had no worries in his head greater than whether or not he would try to have his first kiss that night. And maybe whether he could beat Potter at Quidditch next year.

The sight of the champions getting up to dance in front of the Weird Sisters, though, that had nothing like nostalgia in it. Even aside from Draco's hostility towards Delacour and Diggory, and anxiety for Hermione, there was the good-looking pair of Potter and Parvati that some part of Draco's mind in its Luna-voice kept telling him could have been him, if he'd been brave enough...

It had been the right decision. That didn't make his stupid heart regret it any less at all.

Seamus and Dean waved and made sniggering sounds over at Potter, and that drew his attention. Draco thought Potter's eyes focused on him, for just a second, before Parvati dragged him off to lead him in their required waltz. Potter looked more relaxed when other couples began to join them, taking some of the focus off of them. Neville asked an embittered Ginny to dance, and she accepted begrudgingly, and the other occupants of Draco's table soon followed, joining Dumbledore and Madame Maxime, and poor Sinistra with Crouch. Draco hesitated when he looked at Luna, but he remembered her dancing without any signs of bad memories at the Christmas Eve Gala, so he got up, held out his hand, and kissed hers when she accepted it. "Bon, un danse, Mademoiselle Lovegood?"

"Enchanté," said Luna, and they got up and joined the whirling mass of dancers.

They didn't actually get long to show off their waltzing, before the Weird Sisters switched to a more upbeat song. Most everyone that Draco could see had stayed on the dance floor for it, but not Potter and Parvati, and not Ron and her twin, who followed Potter up to the high table. It was difficult to focus on enjoying himself then, with his old self-consciousness coming into place, hoping at once that Potter didn't notice him and that he did. They'd drifted over towards Hermione, which meant near the front of the room, which meant near Potter, and Krum and Hermione seemed to be having the time of their lives. Draco tried to focus and enjoy himself with Luna, the way he had at the Manor last year. It was hardly any different, except for that Potter was there, and he could not keep allowing that fact to mean everything to his mood and his self-judgment.

He wasn't sure if he was hallucinating, or if it was fearful or wishful thinking, but he kept thinking he felt Potter's eyes on him through the crowd. He saw Parvati go past with a Beauxbatons boy, and looked back to see Potter still sitting there. A chill went through Draco as he caught Potter's gaze, and felt those green eyes focus on him completely. Then Luna pulled him into a nonsensical arm-spinning move, and he lost track of him again.

"Will you come sit down?" Hermione yelled after a couple of songs. "I'm so thirsty!"

She looked flushed, so Draco followed, leading Luna by the hand with him. He caught her stealing a glance back at Neville and Ginny dancing enthusiastically behind them, but neither of them mentioned it. "It's hot, isn't it?" said Hermione, fanning herself with her hand. "Viktor's just gone to get some drinks."

"Guess that's my cue too," said Draco to Luna, "What will you be having, Mademoiselle," and took her drink order before walking off. When he came back, though, it was like walking into a war zone.

"Don't be so stupid! The enemy? Oh, so it's alright when you and Draco go and play Quidditch with him," Hermione snapped, gesturing over at Draco in an argument he really didn't want to be brought into. "But it's different for me?"

Didn't take a genius like Severus to figure out what Ron and Hermione were arguing about.

"I s'pose he asked you to come with him while you were both in the library?"

Luna opened her mouth, but Draco held up a hand. He knew Hermione could hold her own against Ron.

"Yes, he did," said Hermione, flushing darker. "So what?"

"Why is Ron acting like this?" Draco hissed to Potter. "He's just jealous, isn't he?"

Potter looked genuinely surprised. "Jealous? Of what?"

The name Karkaroff drew Draco's attention back to the fight. "He's Karkaroff's student, isn't he?" Ron was saying. "He knows who you hang around with... he's just trying to get closer to Harry- get inside information on him- or get near enough to jinx him-"

Draco might have thought that from the outside too, with his own suspicions about Karkaroff. But he could have told Ron from personal experience that he was wrong. He wondered how Potter couldn't tell this was ugly, mean jealousy, a feeling that much stronger than Ron's hero worship of Krum, to make it all go up in smoke like this.

Draco hated to see Hermione's face the way Ron's words left it then. Her voice shook as she answered. "For your information, he hasn't asked me one single thing about Harry, not one-"

Ron was merciless. "Then he's hoping you'll help him find out what his egg means! I suppose you've been-"

"Ron," Draco said, unable to stop himself, "You're being a pillock."

"Then challenge me to another duel if you like," Ron growled, "I don't bloody care," and rounded back on Hermione.

"I'd never help him work out that egg!" said Hermione, and Draco believed her. "Never. How could you say something like that- I want Harry to win the Tournament. Harry knows that, don't you, Harry?"

"You've got a funny way of showing it," sneered Ron.

"They're making a scene," Draco said in Potter's ear. "Say something, he won't listen to me."

"This whole Tournament's supposed to be about getting to know foreign wizards and making friends with them!" Hermione protested.

"No, it isn't!" shouted Ron. "It's about winning!"

Draco could see they were drawing more attention yet. He downed his glass of punch, wishing for the cool crisp lychee nectar at the Manor's galas, and elbowed Potter.

Luna leaned over and whispered in his ear, "I hate people getting this angry. I'll catch up with you later, alright?" Draco nodded and let her slip away, before elbowing Potter again.

Potter leaned forward, catching Ron and Hermione's eye. "I don't think what Hermione has done is any worse than you and Draco going flying with him, Ron-"

"Oh, right!" Ron snapped, turning with a wild savagery on his best friend then. "I suppose Draco told you to say that! You'd say anything *he* told you to, wouldn't you? It's pathetic! And he wouldn't even go to the *ball* with you-"

Potter leaped to his feet. "Shut up!" he yelled, with a look on his face that could have struck the Dark Lord dead. His handsomeness in that moment was almost surreal, something not belonging in such an inane schoolchildren's quarrel. He belonged in some fairytale or dream, and yet here he was, getting taunted by a Ron Weasley in tattered robes, whose inferiority complex had gone so far out of control, he would unload his venom on anyone who challenged him.

Let it be Draco, then. "Hermione," Draco said, "Ron clearly isn't going to listen to reason. Why don't you go find Viktor, he is your date after all." Hermione looked between him and Ron and then went, Ron staring moodily after her.

"Are you going to ask me to dance at all?" Padma asked Ron. Draco hadn't even noticed she was still there at the table. She might have actually liked Ron, to stick around this long.

"No," said Ron, still glaring after Hermione.

"Fine," snapped Padma, and the poor girl went off in a huff to her sister and some Beauxbatons boys. Draco ought to have taught her some romantic phrases in French for her troubles. Ron really couldn't have been a worse ball date.

"I can't believe you, Ron," Potter fumed, and Ron looked no less angry back.

"You're the one," Ron seethed, "Who needs to-"

Draco had a bad feeling about letting Ron finish that sentence. "Ron," Draco said, "This is like when you were so sure Potter put his name in the Goblet of Fire. You're going to come to your senses eventually, realize your friends were right and that you were making an idiot out of yourself, and be very embarrassed. Why don't you do yourself a favor and skip to the last stage already?"

"You think you know everything, don't you," Ron began, heated, only for the lowest on Draco's ranking of favorite Weasleys to insert himself.

"Listen, you three," Peter said loftily, "I may no longer be Head Boy, but I am here as the representative of *the* Mr. Crouch, so would do well to listen when I tell you that balls are not the right scene for this sort of public-"

"Oh, right, Mr. Crouch," Draco snarled, losing his temper at that pretentious, puffed-up prick's pontificating. *If you knew what this man conceived into the world...* "The man who tried to arrest me for no reason at all, Peter- no, *Percy*, isn't it?" He sugarcoated what he was about to say by finally using Percy's name, as if he was too meaningless to be a proper subject of mockery anymore. "Yes, great man, Mr. Crouch, very on top of things, isn't he? And he has an assistant *so well suited* to his strengths."

Percy drew himself up, very calm and steady. "Ah, yes, you're right," he said, loud enough for half the ballroom to hear, with a slow quiet song and many people already having been trying to listen in on the Chosen One's very public three-person spat. "Mr. Crouch *is* a great man, be as sarcastic as you like. And history has proved he tends to always be *right* in this area. If Mr. Crouch believes you cast the Dark Mark at the World Cup, it's probably true. I would hazard that you used Harry's wand to do it, and played dumb and got my family to cover for you. Well, me and Mr. Crouch see through you, Draco Malfoy. We look at you and see what you are. A Death Eater!"

It felt like the entire hall fell silent, people gasping and nudging each other. Draco could see a knot of his Slytherin yearmates stop moving at the far side of the dance floor, looking utterly stunned, probably not by what Percy had said, but at who he'd had the nerve to say it to, and so publicly. Draco looked around, and expected Severus to charge up and give Percy the tongue-lashing of his life, if not worse, but he was nowhere in sight. So Draco took a deep breath, stepped back, looked Percy up and down, and sneered.

"Charming, Percy," he drawled. "Oh, you *are* intelligent, aren't you? Let me put this in a way your Lilliputian intellect might be able to comprehend. There are two possibilities here. Either I'm not actually a Death Eater or tied to them, and you've just made a vicious false accusation in front of hundreds of people to a *fourth-year*. Or, as you suspect, it could be that I *am* a Death Eater, in which case, you might find before long that you might wish you had *held your tongue*, lest you find *someone else holding it.*"

Draco raised his hand, a gesture to make clear he was picturing Percy's severed tongue in his palm. Then he turned on his heel and stalked out of the Yule Ball, in a silvery blur of embroidery and diamonds. He stopped in the doorway, though, to deliver his final warning.

"If you didn't know, *ask* someone what becomes of tongues that speak ill of Draco Malfoy!"

Sordespiro

Chapter Notes

Hello all! To answer some questions, as for why Luna had dolls with teeth, they weren't real human teeth! I just pictured porcelain dolls with open mouths and porcelain teeth, like this and this or this^^ I didn't know that was weird lol

Anyway, enjoy!

Playlist

Draco headed straight for the marble staircase. He forced himself to maintain a calm, steady walk until he was out of sight of the Yule Ball. Then he took the stairs in twos and threes until he reached the Room of Requirement. *I need the room where I dueled Ron*, he thought, walked back and forth three times, and that smooth blank obsidian oval of a room appeared for him again. He let himself in, took off his frock coat, his vest, and his boots, throwing them behind himself out of the range of fire. Then he began to conjure up dummies to fill the room against him.

Potter found Draco like that, casting Oppugno on progressively more dummies at once, before lashing out with one spell or another to stop them, explode them, burn them, cut them, whatever Draco felt like at the time. For a second time in his life, Potter was in extreme danger of mistakenly being on the wrong end of Sectumsempra with Draco. Enough dummies had been put in motion that Draco almost cursed him before he recognized the peach blur of movement wasn't a sack of sand but a person.

"Bloody hell, Potter! I nearly cut you open!" Draco snarled, and Potter leaped back from the remaining dummy, which had apparently decided Potter would be a better target. "Baubillious!" Draco shouted, and the bolt of lightning that surged from his wand and hit the dummy made both sand and hot air explode right in Potter's face.

Potter could deal with it. It was a better welcome than bleeding to death.

"Draco!" Potter called, making his gingerly way forward once all the dummies were still. He had to step through a lot of sand. "Be careful, don't you have to worry about magical exhaustion?"

"This is nothing," Draco hissed, though of course Potter was right. He wasn't holding back like he should be, when a fourth of the force of the spells he'd been using would have done for a person, and a tenth for a dummy. "How did you even get in here?"

Potter started to brush himself off wincing, his classic princely look from the ball now a distant memory. "I just thought that I needed to find you, and the room you conjured let me in."

"The room *I* conjured- oh, for Salazar's sake," Draco groaned. He didn't know if he could ever disabuse the Gryffindors of that mistaken belief. "And *why* are you here?"

Potter looked around himself instead, with a face like he could easily imagine all the sand turned to blood, and ripped sacks to torn flesh. "I thought you must be upset, after what Percy said in front of everyone. We all know it's not true, Draco. You should have heard how Ron screamed at his brother... and the others thought you'd be so angry that I'd better be the one to go..."

"Oh, like I'm such a menace to society now!" Draco screamed, and shot a wordless bolt of shadow at a sitting dummy that made it wither where it sat, shriveling up like a rotten fruit peel. "You all *really* believe in me, don't you!"

"Draco," Potter said, and it was a measure either of his faith or his stupidity that his hands hadn't strayed to his wand once. Nor could Draco detect any fear in those large, steady green eyes. They had roved at first up and down Draco's sullied silver form, but now they locked on his eyes. "I said we all know you're not a Death Eater. That doesn't mean you're not dangerous." He gestured around himself, shaking his head. "What is this, Draco? Why are you cursing all these fake people?"

"Because it's either cursing them," Draco gritted out through his teeth, "Or cursing *real* people, and out of those two options, I'd think you lot would prefer the former, wouldn't you?"

"Draco," Potter said, still not afraid, nothing but dismayed. "If you're angry, you don't have to be alone. I'm not afraid of you. I've never been afraid of you. No matter how much you try to make me. You do know that, don't you?"

"You pity me," Draco groaned, and sank to his knees between the torn bags of sand, before falling back against the wall to sit on his balled-up Yule Ball outfit. "You pity me, and that's worse than anything! Go ahead, *hate* me- fear me, despise me, *forget* about me- just *don't pity me*!"

Potter must have had a death wish. He stepped right over the last few bags and pulled one up against the wall, to sit on beside Draco. At least it was hard to smell that distinctive Amortentia-tinted scent of him with all the sawdust-like murkiness in the air, the sear of raw dark magic that smelled of over-burned charcoal. But when Potter turned to face him, leaning forward with his thick, soft-looking dark hair full of sand, Draco could smell it anyway. "Is that why you still call me Potter and no one else? Because you're scared if you don't keep me at arm's length, I'll start pitying you?" He ran his fingers through Draco's hair, smoothing over Draco's forehead.

"What- what are you doing?" Draco stammered, heart thudding in his ears as his mouth began treacherously to water.

"Getting sand out of your hair," Potter said, and smiled at him with just his eyes.

All of Draco's anger turned at once, like the point of a wand flipped around, from the outside world to his own self. Was that why he was the angriest? That Percy had humiliated him like that in front of Harry Potter? And he'd humiliated himself in turn, letting Potter find him ripping apart glorified bags, like he belonged in St. Mungo's with Longbottom's parents, or in Azkaban with the witch that put them there-

"Draco," Potter said, eyes seeming to melt in his clouded vision, liquid and soft and weak against him, vulnerable as a boy as strong as Potter ever seemed to get. "Are there no options other than hate or fear or pity?" He kept finger-combing sand from Draco's hair before brushing it off his hands. There were spells to do this quicker, which Muggle-raised Potter and Hermione always seemed to forget, but Draco didn't find himself in any rush to remind him.

"Not with you," Draco said firmly, "We're too different," and Potter just looked thoughtful.

"Are we that different?" he asked softly, absently curling a soft, wispy strand of Draco's hair around his index finger. "When I've talked about you with Sirius in the mirror you gave me, he said he thought you and I were similar."

"Why?"

Potter let the strand loose, before curling it back round again, thumb smoothing over Draco's cheek. "Aside from the Quidditch? He said that both of us are brilliant, but that because we're so brilliant, we're always so stubborn and convinced we're right, we miss what's sitting there right in front of us."

"Yeah?" Draco whispered. His lips wanted to kiss Potter so badly, he could barely feel he trusted them not to surge forward at any second and do it. He bit his lower lip to stop the impulse. Those heavy green eyes flicked down to the motion for a moment, before returning to Draco's.

"And he said," Potter said, "That it's high time you got around to calling me Harry. He finds *Potter* annoying, because it makes him think for a second you mean my father. Remus has that too."

"I did get you a present, Potter," Draco sighed, "So you can't demand your first name from me for Christmas."

"How about if I told you that makes Sirius sad each time to see or hear it, because it makes him remember my father is dead and gone it forever? And that if you don't get into the habit of always using Harry, you know you'll slip up with him..."

"You're making that up," Draco protested, but found he had no urge right now to curse anything. Granted, there were urges in him now, different ones, far more complicated than cursing. But he'd gotten used to ignoring those by now. He could control himself. He was sure. Almost.

"But it is probably true," Potter wheedled, and got a hangdog little pout. "And I just heard you call *Percy* his right first name now, so you can't..."

"Okay, fine," Draco growled. "There, you're Harry, are you satisfied? I bequeath unto you your name, Harry. May you take all the pointless satisfaction from hearing it that you like."

"Say it again."

Draco rolled his eyes indulgently. "Harry. Harry. Harry."

And Harry kept sitting there demanding to hear him say it over and over again, until Draco made them clean up the room and go.

Luna had a good time at the Yule Ball, at least according to her. That made it worthwhile, however miserable the experience had been on the whole for Draco. She'd only danced with Draco, so she hadn't felt panicked or nervous at all. She had just been happy to be part of something so big and loud and exciting with the whole school.

Neither Draco nor Harry told any of their friends anything about Draco's little dark magic tantrum in the Room of Requirement. But Draco did have to use his remaining angel's infusion solution on the morning of Boxing Day.

Draco was secretly relieved not to receive any communications from his parents, whom he'd sent a good and a very bad present- three guesses which one was which, and the first two didn't count. He could imagine his mother swanning around in the silky scarf he'd bought her patterned with real gold leaf, but as for Draco's artistic self-expression he'd had framed and sent to Father, namely his hand-drawn portrait of Dobby? Yeah, the lack of Christmas cards wasn't shocking.

The gift to his family that did go down well was the bottle of Wolfsbane potion he sent to Sirius and Remus. They wrote in a few weeks how much easier it had made the full moon, though they didn't try to burden him asking for more. It was good they didn't, because that had been the one excess bottle left in Severus's stores, brewed as a safeguard in case Draco helping screwed up a batch last-minute. It had still been good, but there was no more where that came from.

Harry also shared their enthusiasm. He seemed to talk to Sirius or Remus or both practically every other night or so these days, but he still had no idea where they actually were.

Things were somewhat cool between Ron and the others over the rest of winter break, but Draco had luckily found a cheat code. Mention the way Percy had yelled that Draco was a Death Eater in front of everyone, and instantly they were all united, even Ron, in the universal hatred of Ron's brother. Like Draco, Percy had turned out to be a peacemaker in his own right.

Getting used to Draco calling Harry by his first name was almost as difficult for their friends as Draco himself. At first, when Draco said it, they would look instinctively around as if

someone else had sat down with them, to say it instead. But when Draco slipped up and said Potter, they were all quick to leap on him and correct him, Luna most of all. "It makes Harry so happy for you to call him by his name," Luna said wisely. "You *must* stick to it now, Draco, you've already caused him so much unhappiness."

Draco tried harder to remember it was Harry from then on.

Extra potions lessons had kicked into high gear, with them following essentially the sixth-year curriculum in sped-up form. They skipped around in the book to start with Elixir to Induce Euphoria, which Severus said was less difficult and prone to mishap than many earlier brews, as well as quicker. Draco made a sunshine-yellow creation that Severus deemed "acceptable" on the first attempt. He had no choice, when a rainbow shot merrily out from beside it.

Severus walked with Draco and made sure he returned the leftover usable bits to each proper place in his storeroom, shrivelfigs, porcupine quills, sopophorous beans, peppermint sprigs, and wormwood. Draco left peppermint springs until last, to make his hands smell nicer, and gave Severus an almighty pout when he said he would not be allowed to drink the potion or take any with him. "You are not here," Severus said, "To indulge yourself, and fritter away your time serving your own selfish, short-sighted interests. You are too well self-taught in that regard. This is an expedited study of a difficult subject, and I expect discipline above all things."

Which meant Severus had all the more reason to reject the proposal Draco made next session about Wolfsbane out of hand. "No," he said, as firm and definitive as he always got when Draco asked to spend the summer with him. He said no when Draco repeated the question, no when Draco argued it would be good practice, and no when Draco resorted to whining. "The answer is no, and will remain no. If you persist, I may be forced to hand your remaining detentions over to Professor Moody, and see how dedicated you remain to producing Wolfsbane for your cousin's lover."

So there was nothing for it but to give up. On doing it with Severus, that was. Draco had gotten too attached to the idea of helping Remus again, and if that marked him as having a savior complex, well, he was still eons behind Potter- no, Harry, he had to think of him as Harry now- still eons behind Harry in that regard. After all, when it came to illicitly making high-level Potions, Draco knew exactly where to go.

"Oh, Draco, don't you think we should be focusing more on helping Harry?" Hermione groaned despairingly. "He still isn't any closer to figuring out his egg, and it's just next month!"

Draco knew exactly what the Second Task would be, but had no way of explaining how, nor how to use that big useless egg to uncover the information honestly. Apparently Diggory had given Potter- no, Harry- had given Harry a clue, in exchange for helping him with the dragon. Draco urged Potter to just follow that lead, despite his own personal issues with Diggory, but Harry was either too stubborn or hated Diggory so much as well, he seemed determined to figure it out himself.

Which made it not Draco or Hermione's problem. A self-made conundrum. "Hermione, I haven't even told you what potion it is yet," he whined. "Even if you don't want to help me, will you show me where you made the..." He lowered his voice. "Illicit Polyjuice Potion, somehow, illegally, as a *second-year*, which, can I just tell you how impressive that is, by the way..."

"Stop sucking up," Hermione sighed, "I'll show you the bathroom, at least." She led him to Moaning Myrtle's bathroom, of all places. "What? It's one place we know no one will go."

Myrtle didn't seem to be there at the moment, but there was no telling when she'd be back. "She never did last time, and she likes you. What was more surprising was that Professor *Snape* never caught wind. I was always terrified he would, and we'd have to try and get you to save us, from being punished too hard for our conspiracy against *you.* Except you're in the dungeons with him, and I suppose he watches your motions more closely..."

"When I tell Potter what this is for, he'll let us use the Marauder's Map," Draco said confidently. "Then I can keep away from Severus. He'll never have to know. I'll get the ingredients from the Malfoy private stores, or order them. I have a fair idea of some of his suppliers. I've thought all this out, Hermione, you see? I just need you to help me with the place and the brewing."

"Stop being mysterious," Hermione whined, poking at him. "Keep this up, Frankenstein, and I'll start thinking it really is a solution to build a Golem out of reanimated body parts."

"Okay," Draco said, "I'm not trying to be mysterious, I just think you'll freak out and say it's too hard for fourth-years- though if you did Polyjuice in *second-year*, with essentially no help, Hermione, you're more than capable- it's Wolfsbane, okay? I want to send Sirius and Remus more."

"Oh, Draco, that's wonderful!" she exclaimed, brightening at once. It seemed to be one of her favorite things, these times where she found she had been thinking worse of her best friend than was actually warranted. "But you are right, Draco, I worry that it's too hard. I know you helped your godfather with it last year, but helping and making alone are two different things..."

"I won't be alone," Draco said, flicking the new Star of Ishtar charm on her wrist. "I'll have you. I hope."

Hermione caved as expected, and for once was the one to advise secrecy about it with their friends beside Harry, who they needed the map from. "They'll want to help," she sighed, "You know Luna definitely will, and just get in the way. But never tell them I said that!" Draco nodded, very much in agreement.

From the start, he and Hermione worked surprisingly well as a Potions-making team. It hadn't occurred to him before, but they had spent all four years partnered up together in the red line. Myrtle was not too bad a distraction, since Draco knew how to talk to her, and get her distracted from any upset, much to Hermione's amazement.

They were both careful to keep up the appearance of their normal routines, with the only real divergence Ron's fault, as he refused to keep coming to flying on Saturdays if Draco was to have Krum there. So Draco tried to uninvite Krum, he really did, he told Krum he couldn't come and the boy nodded. Yet the stubborn Seeker was still there waiting glumly outside the dungeons at 11:30 prompt that Saturday night, as if Draco had never said a thing, so there was no help for it. Ron was the one cut from them.

They took Harry on a walk around the lake on the 12th of January, working to bring him around gradually together to the idea of lending the Marauder's Map for not hours but weeks. But the moment he heard what they were planning, he suggested it himself, without them having to ask. He fished it out, insisting that they would need it not to get caught. He seemed impressed by Hermione's rule-breaking, though unsurprised by Draco's. "So you'll be spending hours in our Potions class every week, Draco," Harry reckoned out, "Plus three hours extra with Snape on Sunday nights. And now you're brewing another complicated potion on the side as well?"

Draco shrugged. "I *have* always felt that Hogwarts isn't sufficiently academically challenging for me."

"You know," Hermione gasped, hand going to her mouth, "I never wanted to say it, but sometimes... I feel the same way!"

"And sometimes I hate both of you," Harry laughed.

Giant moonwort was easily stolen from the Herbology greenhouses, where students grew it in, well, giant enough quantities that it wasn't missed. Aconite, the actual plant of wolfsbane, could be ordered in cheap batches in bulk by owl post, alternating between each other and Harry to avoid notice. It made even cheaper if they got them unprocessed in flower form. More innocuous as well, as the one time Ron got curious and opened Harry's package, and Harry just passed it off as a gift from one of Harry's many admirers. And they were many, girls lurking around him giggling like Krum's fangirls, now that Harry had done so well in the First Task. Draco could console himself that he was the one Harry trusted with a prized possession of his beloved dead parents, mainly always in Draco's possession, given the greater difficulty maneuvering around Severus than almost anyone else.

As for the pickled myrrh, myrrh was easy enough to order by owl post in the same way, but Draco had to make a trip to the Manor's stores for more equipment and pickling solution as well, to say nothing of the top-quality mercury-like black quicksilver they needed. The higher the quality of the metal, Severus had told him, the more foolproof the potion. The other components were easier to get by on less potent or fresh ingredients, but not the black quicksilver, which held the whole mixture together.

About a week into their production of the potion, Hermione nervously informed Draco that she had read it was illegal to brew Wolfsbane without a license from the ministry, and that the Ministry liked to strictly track the potion. Draco just looked her straight in the eye, and asked her if that meant she wanted to back out. She sat there quietly for the whole time they were removing the flowers from the large batch of aconite, and then finally said no.

"This isn't a one-time thing, you know," Draco pressed on. "This is forever, definitely forever until Sirius and Remus don't have to be on the run. I've committed myself to doing this for them, month after month, just like I did with Severus last year. It's just that we have less time, less experience, and it's illegal."

"Oh," Hermione said rather shrilly. "No different at all, then!"

"Harry thinks we can do it and get away with it," Draco reassured her.

Hermione gave him a severe look. "Harry would believe it if I told him you could dry up the Great Lake and enslave the Giant Squid with a single spell. That doesn't mean you *actually* could."

It was easier to sneak off to Apparate when Draco could go to Hogwarts legitimately on a Hogsmeade visit. This, of course, made it impossible for Draco to fulfill his promise for them to go to Hogsmeade together all year, just the two of them. And Harry was predictably sulky when Draco first told him he was ditching him, but relaxed when Draco explained why. Harry seemed willing to do just about anything for his beloved godfather, as well as his favorite Defense professor.

The five of them walked to Hogsmeade together, with Draco and Hermione whispering, trying to think of excuses to explain Draco's absence to the others. They finally told them that Draco wanted to purchase a birthday present for Luna in absolute secrecy, as well as making other preparations, and was not to be disturbed under any circumstances.

"Well," Harry said, "If you really want to be secret, you might as well take this," and pulled out the invisibility cloak from his coat and handed it to Draco, never having been asked. When Draco pulled him aside to ask if he was sure, he whispered, "I just don't want you to get caught illegally Apparating! Or by your father! Just try and get back and meet us at the Three Broomsticks before the day's over. We'll miss you."

"Stalker," Draco hissed, and Harry smiled at him and pushed the cloak into his hands. His bare hands felt very cold against Draco's fine suede gloves. They slid over Draco's and the cloak for a moment, the slippery fabric shimmering between their fingers with the pressure and warmth and cold seeping between. Then Ron cleared his throat, and Draco headed out.

He was pleased to find he could Apparate directly into the cellar storerooms without any issues. Father hadn't closed the wards against him. Maybe just because he didn't know Draco could Apparate, but still, kind of him. And Draco found the myrrh, black quicksilver, and pickling solution and equipment all soon enough, in perfect-looking order and condition.

It would have been nobler if Draco could say he made that journey up the stairs to go find his mother, wish her a belated Happy Christmas, hug her and make sure she was doing well and tell her that he loved her. But he climbed them for a far simpler reason. Father's genealogy register had yielded unexpected fruit, in the presence of birth and death records of Malfoy house elves, and given Draco a fast-approaching birthday for Dobby: January 29. And he had a present in mind. It was one of the few, if not the only thing, about the Manor that Dobby had ever told Draco he liked.

Taking the dragon decal down from the door made it look like it was no longer Draco's room. An odd impulse made Draco dart in and take the pictures off the wall and put them in the sack too, before Apparating to the alley behind the Three Broomsticks.

Draco expected the others to be happy to see him, but instead, they just cast him worried looks, if not as suspicious as they might have been in past years. "Someone came by looking for you," Hermione said at once, "He was asking when you'd be back," and Draco's hand went to his wand pocket.

"Who?"

"He didn't say," Ron said, "But he was a real weird sort, mate. Older fellow, gray hair as long as Luna's. These big weird-colored eyes. He left this for you. Pretty ominous, if you ask me." It was a note on custom stationery, with a purple design of several P's entwined together around the frame.

The only word it said was *Graveyard.*

"Do you know what this is?"

"I know *who* this is. I have to go." But Harry called out to wait. "Don't worry, I'll tell you all about it after, okay, I promise?" Draco said, with no intention of following through. "Here," he said, and left the bag from the Manor beside Hermione, before walking as fast as he could out of the pub.

Hogsmeade had a graveyard, he knew, a small, ill-tended one that never tended to have many visitors. The reason he knew this was morbid depending on your perspective: he and Theo had used to sneak away from the other Slytherins during Hogsmeade visits to make out there.

It wasn't Theo he met there, but Pammaque Periander, whom he had known would be waiting. What made him stop walking, nearly tripping over his own feet, wasn't the sight of the assessor, who looked quite different than Draco remembered, his once mixed hair now gone fully charcoal grey, in plain unheeled boots and untarnished robes of pure black. Nor was it the particularly foreboding gloom to the graveyard today, a place where all the sunlight and early promise of spring on that February day seemed to die away. It was what Periander was doing: knelt down in the corner of a graveyard, his arms shoulder-deep in the dirt, digging.

"Sir!" Draco called in fear, hurrying over the rest of the way. "Sir, I'm here, you wanted to see me? It's me, Draco Malfoy. What... what is this?"

And then Draco saw to the other side of Periander, and saw what lay there waiting for the dirt, gone like her master from color all to shadow: the corpse of the assessor's Augurey.

"She's been under stasis charms," Periander said without expression, not turning from his task. There were no odd laughs or cringing smiles from the man like Draco remembered. He seemed to have aged ten or twenty years since they had last seen one another. "I will release them before I put her in the earth." Maledictum's pale eyes had been closed, with all the pretty mint-green that Draco remembered in her feathers turned to a sooty gray. She looked

thinned and shrunken in upon herself, even her wings looking smaller, where once they had extended across almost the whole length of the cellar. "Do you remember this bird, Mr. Malfoy?"

"Yes," Draco said faintly, "Maledictum," and sat beside Periander. His hand was near his wand, even if his chest was aching already from a dim presentiment of guilt. "Does this have anything to do with my assessment this summer?" This bird had assisted in the assessments, the man's livelihood... "I should offer, um, compensation..."

"My bird took ill shortly after your assessment. I have conducted none since, but Maledictum has since sickened, and finally passed away, seven months to the day we met. Your father had already offered to pay me for her life," Periander said tightly. "I refused."

"Sir... surely you know you don't have to do that with your hands..." He looked far too elderly and frail now to be forced to such a task.

"I will bury her by my own hands," Periander said, still without having looked at Draco once. "I will have no other magic interfere with the ritual I mean to conduct."

Chills crept up Draco's spine. "Please, sir, what happened to her? Is this my fault?"

"Your fault?" Periander said with a grimace, throwing another armload of dirt aside. At least he threw it to the side Draco wasn't sitting. "You merely did as I instructed throughout. No, the fault is not yours, but your wand, Mr. Malfoy, the wand you keep touching. There is no need. I did not call you here to attack you, but to save you."

"Save me?" Draco echoed disbelievingly, chills just getting worse, but Periander finally seemed to have accomplished the depth he desired.

When he took his arms away, Draco could see the hole he had made was enough to bury three Maledictums. He must have been at it a long time, before he had gone to find Draco, and then returned to it. Draco could only feel grateful Periander had not appeared in the Three Broomsticks so covered in grave dirt. Surely his friends would have told him that part.

It seemed a softer part of the ground, on the outskirts of the graveyard. When Draco glanced around at the nearest gravestones, he saw the name Periander on several. *Oh, he's burying the bird by his family. Like she* was *his family. I would hate me if I were him, even though he knows I didn't mean to do it.* Draco had been avoiding looking at Maledictum directly, but he had to once Periander picked her up for the burial. "Um, do you want to say a few words, or..." Draco hoped Periander wouldn't want him to. What was he supposed to say, beyond *Sorry*?

"No," Periander said stiffly. "Only the words of the ritual." Draco had tried valiantly to ignore that word ritual, but it kept popping up. The sky had clouded over above them, as if in anticipation of whatever dark ceremony was coming. "Finite incantatem," Periander said, taking the stasis charm off, and abruptly, Draco could smell the bird rotting. "Corpo interfectorum," Periander intoned softly, huge violet eyes closing for a long moment, then lifted Maledictum high in his arms, towards the shadow of the clouds.

"What should I do?" Draco asked, wishing he had ignored the note, whatever came of that.

Periander just told him, "Stay." He lay the bird down in the ground, where she made a strange-looking bundle of shriveled feathers, like some fungus that grew out of the dirt rather than being placed inside it. Then he reached into his black robes and withdrawn a long, slender silver knife, with an engraved hilt covered in moonstones. Draco fought not to react, just watched cautiously as Periander drew the knife across his own left palm, dripping the blood into the grave over Maledictum. "Sanguinis amici," he called while the blood dripped, and then gestured for Draco to hold out his hand.

"You're just going to cut my palm too?" Draco asked nervously, and Periander nodded. Draco knew he was being colossally stupid, that he should probably just run and cut his losses, but something compelled him to give the assessor his hand instead. Periander cut it, and it hurt far worse than just a Diffindo would on his palm, but Draco bit his lip and held back a scream.

"Sanguinis interfector," Periander recited, and then turned Draco's palm to let the blood drip onto Maledictum. Once he let Draco go, Draco drew his wand to bandage the hand with Ferula, but Periander shook his head, gesturing for him to wait. No other magic to disrupt the ritual, it seemed. Periander drew his own wand, and called out "Sordespiro!" with his voice cracking on the heavy syllables. A black shadow passed from his wand down to Maledictum, and Draco watched it.

And then Maledictum's eyes opened, their icy blue a pure black.

Draco fell back from the grave mouth, screaming. Periander sighed. "She's not really alive. You must bury her now. Take your hands, fill them with dirt, and throw it over Maledictum. Each time you do, you must say 'Sordespiro'. Do you understand?" Draco nodded shakily.

He kept thinking he should stop. He didn't even know what this ritual was, save that Periander had said he was here to save Draco. But there seemed nothing to do but take great armfuls of dirt, and pour them down over a bird that looked by all appearances to be alive again. There was almost an anger to those polluted ink-black eyes.

"Sordespiro," Draco said each time, "Sordespiro, Sordespiro, Sordespiro..." He was most eager just to cover those eyes so he didn't have to look at them anymore.

When the grave was filled, Draco started trying to pat it in, but Periander stopped him. "No," he said, reached into his robes, and withdrew a small opaque black jar. He uncapped it and gave it to Draco. "Fill this with the grave dirt. Pack it tightly." Draco obeyed, watching his hands get muddied with it. Periander closed the jar and handed it to Draco, then ran his hands over and packed in the ground himself. Draco stared fearfully at the jar in his dirty hands, before Periander barked to him. "Up! We're going." Draco stood.

"Where are we going?"

"The ritual is incomplete," Periander told him impatiently. "We must take the grave dirt to a seer. Only then can we uncover the mysteries of your fate."

"This is just a Divination ritual?" Draco complained. "I'm not going anywhere with *you*."

"You understand so little," Periander marveled. "Did you never suspect there were secrets learned in your assessment that I would never have told *your* father?"

"Tell them to me now," Draco said as evenly as he could, "And I'll finish the ritual."

Periander stared at him, beneath a sky that had gone almost completely dark. "Have you never noticed your wand behaving oddly? I speak not of its behavior at Ollivander's, or the brands that it has left on the hands of those who try to take it from you. I speak of other times. Has your wand ever weakened suddenly, or stopped working for you at all?" Draco nodded. "When you felt you needed it most?" Nod. "The need to use aggressive or dark magic to expel frustration? Are you unhappier if you have not used it for long?" Nod. "Weakness or depression after you use the full power of the wand?"

Draco nodded each time, but ventured to argue, "Mr. Periander, sir, you said in your letter to my father that those issues were the result of the difference in capacity between the wand's power and my own body at this age."

"That was a lie."

"You- you said that I was the strength of a wizard a few years older, but that I would not experience much growth from now on."

"That was also a lie, Mr. Malfoy. I had no intention of placing such a dangerous weapon in the hands of Lucius Malfoy." He did not specify whether the wand or Draco himself was the weapon. "That wand is *evil*. Not simply because of who it belonged to, or what it did, but because of what it is. Maledictum and I conducted hundreds of assessments together, and yet the taste of blood from an animal *that wand* killed was the only thing to make her unwell a day in his life. It *killed* her, Mr. Malfoy, because the wand that cast the Killing curse is toxic. When I examined Maledictum after your assessment, the shape of her rotting innards proved that. Maledictum may feed on animals, but what she lived off was *magic.* And your magic- your magic sent through that wand is corrosive."

"I don't understand," Draco said numbly.

"There is a presence in that wand that I do not yet understand," Periander said grimly. "The ritual should unveil the future crimes of the murderer. You must stop using that wand, Mr. Malfoy. You must not cast a single spell more with it. It will poison you. Not like it poisoned Maledictum, but it *will* be poison. The presence I sense is almost like a dark soul, a soul that hungers to be fed. You should put that wand away and turn to another."

"I can't!" Draco said, panic swelling through him and threatening to overwhelm him. "I can't, I've tried, but it destroys any wand I touch that I want to replace it with- no other wands work, I'm as good as a Squib without it-"

"Then you should destroy that wand, Mr. Malfoy, if you can. Or at least *do not use it.*"

"But I won't be able to use magic otherwise, will I? You're telling me I have to give up my *magic* because of this?"

Periander had no doubt in his unwavering violet eyes. "I assure you, Draco Malfoy, if you carry on using that wand as you have been, you will lose far more than your magic-"

"I don't have to listen to you!" Draco yelled, "You're insane," and began to stalk away.

"Give me your wand," Periander ordered, following him, and Draco just laughed derisively. "Give me the grave dirt. Where are you going?"

"Back to Hogwarts where you can't follow!"

Periander grabbed his shoulder. "You said that you would finish the ritual!" he protested, and Draco laughed again.

"I did," Draco said, "I never said with *you*," and ripped his shoulder from Periander's grasp. Then he ran. He sprinted out of the graveyard with all of his Seeker's speed. When he looked back to be sure Periander wouldn't shoot curses at him from behind, he just saw the man standing there over the grave still, wand not even out. The only expression his face seemed to hold was fear.

Draco told himself it was fear of some magic in the promise he'd made, coming back to bite him, and not belief in what Periander had said that made him try to complete it. He talked himself back and forth a hundred times on the walk back to Hogwarts. But when he got there, the only stop he made was to heal and wash his hands, before heading right to the Divination classroom.

He had a brief moment of doubt, thinking of the miserable time he'd had in Divination, and how little stock most of the school put in the teacher. And after all, she'd made some bizarre prediction about dragons to him last year that hadn't come true. She'd said he'd save Sirius...

What had she actually said?

Draco got out his notebook and reread it. *The heart will stop beating. The heart of the Grim is a wolf. When the Dragon breathes his fire, the Grim will rise on the flames and the Rat is swallowed inside them.*

Draco was lucky enough to find Trelawney right in her inner sanctum, presumably enjoying the peace of quiet of so few students about. She was gazing intently into a crystal ball, but she looked up when Draco cleared his throat. "Oh, Mr. Malfoy," she said, looking her usual batty self, except none too pleased to see him of all people there. He had always been one of her worst students in Slytherin, though not for lack of trying. She personally ensured he would never beat Hermione for marks.

"Professor Trelawney," Draco said earnestly, "I need your help with something. Please. I know you're always saying how weak the Sight is in me. And you're such an incredible seer, Professor, please, I thought of you right away. If you would just do one thing for me, I'd owe you such a favor. I really would..."

"What is it, Mr. Malfoy?" said Trelawney. The praise and offer of favors had changed her demeanor towards him rather quickly.

Draco drew out the opaque jar, glad that its contents were hidden. He didn't want to explain having a jar of grave dirt if he didn't have to, especially if there happened to be some blood that had made its way into the jar. "Here, Professor Trelawney. There's just one spell I need to do, and I need a Seer present for it. It's just a small present for my cousin Luna's birthday. Sordespiro," Draco said, and tapped his wand on the jar. Nothing happened. "Sordespiro. Sordespiro!"

"Perhaps," Trelawney said, "The spell must be cast by a seer itself. What kind of present is this, Mr. Malfoy?"

"A memento," Draco said, "Of someone dear passed away," and she nodded mistily.

"You should have said before that it was for Miss Lovegood," Trelawney said. "Her mother, no doubt. Your cousin is such an excellent student. So respectful... so gifted... I would be honored to assist in this for her. Let me see. What was the incantation?" Draco repeated it for her, and she echoed, "Sordespiro!"

There was an immediate reaction from the jar, which lifted in the air and began to turn and spin rapidly. Draco scooted his chair back, alarmed, but Trelawney stared at in fascination, her eyes glazing over. He recognized the look on her face, the trance she had fallen into when she made the prophecy about the dragon. Then the grave dirt had exploded out all over her hands, the jar simply disappearing in a puff of dark smoke.

"*I see a claw... a talon...*" she whimpered, and took handfuls of dirt and smeared it over her face, while tears ran freely from her eyes. "*The dragon's claw... I see the claw take hold of the stag and rend him open... the stag will love the dragon, and the dragon will be the stag's doom... I see... I see the stag's blood... I see blood and fire and fire in the blood... the snake!*"

Draco jumped back, standing when he heard her scream, but she kept gasping out words while the muddied tears fell from her face.

"*The dragon kisses the stag and the betrayer is betrayed... when the stag loves the dragon, the stag will bleed... when the shadow of the tower falls... when the alligator shows his face... when the ship is wrecked and the blinded corpse moves and the lamentations of the weak roll over the land with the turn of the wheel of snakes and stars... doom for the stag... the stag... the snake! The snake! The snake is coming! THE SNAKE!*"

And there was a snake before them suddenly, steaming from inside and letting out smoke, still alive but dying, a blinded snake crawled out of the dirt on her lap, and then the dirt on her dress and hands and face was no longer dirt but searing crimson blood. Trelawney's eyes focused, and then she looked at her burnt hands, looked down at the dying snake, and screamed.

"Professor!" Draco cried out, drawing his wand.

She drew her own, holding it between them. "What have you done?" she shrieked, tears still pouring down her face. "What is this? What did you make me do?"

"I'll get rid of the snake," Draco said, "I know a spell," struggling to remember the spell Severus had used after his duel with Harry. But she waved her wand no less fearfully.

"OUT!" she bellowed. "GET OUT OF HERE AND NEVER COME BACK!"

After the prophecy, Draco went to his dorm and wrote down every word he could remember, though he did worse than with the first prophecy. This was longer and more complicated and bloodier, and he barely had anything coherent to bring to Severus even if he wanted to. All he could focus on was that when the dragon loved the stag, it would mean the stag bleeding, the stag's doom... and he had a sinking feeling he knew who the stag was meant to be.

He should have brought it to Severus. He could have. There was no Langlock to prevent it. But he told no one of the full truth. To his Severus and his friends, he simply told them about Periander wanting him at the bird's burial, and left out the blood magic and Trelawney. So the only lingering result of all this unpleasantness was a change in his schedule.

Oh, and he had to explain, to anyone who asked, why he was officially banned from Divination at Hogwarts for life.

What You'll Sorely Miss

Chapter Notes

Playlist

Dear Dragon-Face,

About your issues with anger. Believe me, I know a thing or two about anger. For the first few years in Azkaban, I don't know if I felt much else besides anger, and grief and cold. And I'm not going to be the person to try and prescribe you with anger management, or cute little breathing exercises or any of that shit. Spite, resentment, all of that can be useless self-destructive poison, if it's directionless. It can turn upon yourself. Or you can turn it outward.

That's what I did. I took my anger as my weapon and turned it to vengeance. Anger kept me alive in Azkaban. Anger kept the Dementors at bay, even more than being an Animagus. Anger is what sustained me through the years, even when every one of those years felt like a century. I was robbed, and when you're robbed, you can lament over your losses, you can count them and go over and over them in your head. Or you can go after the robber and try to rob them back.

It's like if you lose your house in a fire. You can try to put out those flames, and sit and cry over everything you used to own. You can try to replace what you lost. But what I would do before anything is go after the person who set the fire.

Remus is looking over my shoulder and telling me this is terrible advice, and that at this rate you'll be worse off for having your uncle in your life. To that, I would like to instruct Moony to get his abnormally cute nose out of other people's correspondence.

As for your question of anti-love potions or spells, it's an interesting idea. I don't know anything about it, though, even in dark magic terms. My first instinct, and Remus agrees with me here, is that it's probably impossible. If love can't be created by magic, it would make sense that it can't be destroyed by it, either. Humans do well enough at that part ourselves.

Sincerely,
Your Grim-Faced Uncle

Draco had the supplies for Wolfsbane now. He quickly forgot a Yule Ball had ever happened, with the pure academic thrill of such a difficult potion coming to obsess both him and Hermione. He felt very close to her on those long afternoons and evenings, carefully researching and casting charms to speed the pickling process of the myrrh, to the point that

Hermione predicted they could have the first batch ready to send to Remus by Valentine's Day. She kept cautioning him, though, that the first one or two tries could very well fail, and that it would be better safe than sorry testing it. They didn't want to poison their favorite Defense teacher.

Everything should have been fine. It should have been his best year so far at Hogwarts. He had Severus and four whole friends, which was more than enough. Sirius and Remus seemed relatively safe, so he didn't have to worry after his uncle like last year. None of his friends were turning on him, and there was no real suspicion towards him from the rest of the school. The Dark Mark accusations were child's play compared to what he'd suffered in second year. And the surprise blood magic, while terrifying, had at least lightened his course load.

But it wasn't fine. There was that impracticable warning of Periander's, and Trelawney's prophecy that followed, and most of all, perhaps in some shadowy relation to it, Draco kept making enemy after enemy. Maybe because, as he had admitted to Sirius, he was so often angry.

It was the most bizarre thing, how frustrated Draco found himself getting all the time for no reason. He knew he was tightly strung without knowing precisely why. Severus had been right, he was making too many enemies- what was the list from just this year? Maybe Cornelius Fudge, but that was just a start. *Igor Karkaroff, Amos Diggory, Cedric Diggory, Barty Crouch senior* and *junior, Fleur Delacour, Percy Weasley, Pammaque Periander, Sybil Trelawney...*

When he wrote them all down in his fourth notebook, it had him disconcerted. Not just at the length of the list, but when he realized that even with all the lashing out at those names, he hadn't made himself any less angry.

Maybe the letter would have been more useful if Draco had outright told Sirius and Remus what his real fear was about the anger: that his mind or his magic or something even deeper to the core of him was being twisted by his wand, and Periander was right. But he hadn't been able to break his self-imposed silence for one reason, past even the need to admit participation in what had been a very dark ritual. It was that, whether he imagined it Remus or Hermione or Severus even he went to, he could not be sure they would not want to take the talon wand from him. And he would rather give up many things- in darker moments, it felt like he would sooner give up Hermione or Severus themselves, let alone Harry or Ron or Luna, *anyone* in his life- he'd give up anyone or anything sooner than the talon wand-

Because he would be a Squib without it- because it would mean giving up his magic- that was the only reason why, he told himself- except-

Draco couldn't *think.* He *wished* there was some other presence in the wand like Periander had said, for him to *talk* to, because there might as well have been a Langlock on him about his wand too. No one knew but Periander, and Draco had betrayed him already...

He put down the letter from Sirius with a groan, only to pocket it when he heard the others coming into the dorm. The sight of a certain sandy blond head, deep in conversation with Vince about Quidditch, made Draco call out impulsively, "Theo! Theo, you're afraid of me, aren't you?"

The other four Slytherins turned as one, looking baffled not so much by his words as the friendly tone he asked them in. "Ah... yes?" Theo said after a long moment, dark blue eyes narrowing, looking unsure of the answer Draco wanted. That was one of the things that had drawn Draco most to Theo, though it had taken some time to understand it about a childhood friend. In those keen, calm eyes of Theo's was a depth capable of taking in and holding any secret.

"Then come here," Draco said, and crooked a finger. Theo approached Draco's bed as slowly as if it held an untrained Hippogriff, while the other boys goggled. "Don't worry, Blaise, I'll give him back intact. Relatively."

"What are you going to do to me?" Theo asked, a pronounced pallor to his angular visage. Draco smirked, unable not to enjoy the sensation of being imposing when it came to Theo. In the blue loop, he'd been hard-pressed to intimidate Theo no matter what he did, even with a Dark Mark on his wrist.

"Come into my bed," Draco purred, "And find out."

He laughed at Theo's expression before pulling him in, drawing the curtains shut and casting Muffliato and Spelunca secure. Theo kicked off his shoes with instinctive politeness, looking nearly as awkward to be trapped here as he had in second year, when it had been Harry Potter behind that aloof aristocratic face.

"Draco," Theo began, looking around the emerald canopy with misgiving. "I don't think..."

"Theo," Draco said, leaning forward and touching his thigh, "I haven't brought you in here to debauch you." Even if the way Theo's eyes dropped to Draco's hand showed a certain skepticism towards that assertion. "This is just the only place in Hogwarts I can be sure we won't be seen or overheard. Theo, I've never known anyone better at keeping a secret. Or at researching-"

"What about your Muggleborn-"

"Researching *dark* magic," Draco finished, and Theo's faint anxiety gave way to arch exasperation.

"Really, Draco? Did you have to put on such a performance just to request my help? If my father ever hears about the puerile *jokes* you make-"

"Not," Draco drawled, "That I'm not willing to *reward* you for your help, should you prove useful... yes, I could be *quite* charitable, given the right incentive..."

"Oh, so it would be *charity*, would it?" Theo retorted, and the way he raked his hand through his sleek sandy hair made Draco think of Harry. "Spare me. And don't think yourself capable of menacing me into compliance-"

"I already have," Draco said, and tapped his fingers on Theo's thigh. Theo shivered. "Now, I know you're curious, aren't you? Of course you are. I'm an extremely fascinating person."

Theo didn't roll his eyes at that the way Severus would have, but the flash of his blue eyes was eloquent enough. "So... you remember about my wand, right?"

"No one's said anything," Theo said quickly, raising his hands. He got a more calculating look, once Draco took it out and laid its bent form between them. "I'll hazard a guess. Either you want to do something monstrous with it, or you're worried it's doing something monstrous to you." He watched Draco's face. "The latter, then. Do you think it's influencing those bouts of exhaustion you have?"

Draco took a deep breath. "Theo, this wand... strange things happen around it, and someone's told me some things about it that I can't tell anyone, or they might try and take it from me... I mean, if they even *could*..."

Draco reached down after and quickly stroked at the bend with two fingers, thinking intently, *Don't worry, I don't* want *you taken from me, I just want to understand you...*

Theo tilted his head, staring as if wondering what horrors could be hidden in such a small piece of twisted wood. "You want me to help you figure out what's wrong with Bellatrix Lestrange's wand." Draco nodded, leaning closer, and Theo shifted, frowning. "And why would *I* help you? And speak no more of *charity.*"

Draco considered, dismissing the threats that came to mind, and took his hand from Theo's thigh to pick up the wand and twirl it casually between both hands. "Because I've recently come into possession of a certain book I think would interest you?" He jerked his head to the side, and Theo fished out *Manifestos of the Great Gellert Grindelwald* from under the pillow. Theo held back a gasp, but his pretty eyes filled with the kind of naked, unrefined want that Draco had only ever seen in them in the blue loop in very different circumstances, albeit in this same bed.

"Ah, ah, ah," Draco singsonged, tapping his wand on the cover to hold it closed when Theo tried to look inside. "Not for you until after we've solved this."

"To keep?" Theo said eagerly, and Draco knew he had him.

"If you can figure out what's wrong with my wand, you can take and keep every book I *own*."

"Tell me, then," Theo said, dropping the book, though not without one last appreciative look. Even once they fell on Draco, his eyes took some time to shift from their heavy, intensive stare to his usual reserve. "Tell me what's happened to you."

"You know the penalty if you speak of this." Draco poked out at Theo's tongue playfully, and then took a deep breath. "I suppose I should begin by telling you, I think there's more reason than our tainted blood that my aunt went mad..."

Draco and Theo started spending far more time together, once Draco had unburdened himself to him about the talon wand. It was time spent in research, with Theo writing to Ollivander using Draco's name for any information he could get, and then scouring the library, about

both wands and dark magic rituals. It wasn't as much as it might have been, with his extra time already divided up for flying sessions, extra potions lessons, and the secret brewing of Wolfsbane with Hermione. But his newly increased association with Theo was still an anomaly that Draco's friends noticed and regarded with suspicion, particularly Harry.

"Didn't you once say he fancies you?" Harry asked, with an inexplicable edge to his voice. He gave poor Luna an unfairly nasty glare when she broke out into giggles.

Draco shrugged. "I may have been exaggerating. It's just a research project. What's it to you, anyway, *Potter*?"

"Nothing," Harry said, wilting in his chair. But there was a stiltedness to his manner with Draco, for the next few days at least.

It only seemed to let up on an evening late in January, when Harry came up to Draco at the Slytherin table at dinner, to whisper a question in his ear: "Will you take me up to the prefect's bathroom together after dinner?" Draco choked on his pumpkin juice, sputtering, and forced a faux-grateful smile at Blaise, who had withdrawn his wand and cast an insufferably smug Anapneo without blinking. Theo had leaned in to try and listen, and whether or not he'd heard, he certainly had a similarly judgmental look on his face.

Draco looked down at his plate, found it all eaten, and decided he couldn't wait until after dinner to find out what this was about. Was Harry *coming on to him*? Because in truth, apart from the potential presence of actual prefects, Draco could hardly imagine a better place for it...

Harry led them up towards the stairs to the bathroom before Draco had even agreed. "Come on, I know you have a note to use it from your godfather," Harry wheedled. "This was the advice Cedric gave me, to take the egg and take a bath here, he gave me the password for the bathroom and everything, but if I'm with you, I don't have to use my invisibility cloak. It's my bag anyway, though, in case we have to stay until after curfew..."

"Oh, *that's* why you're dragging me off to a lavish bath, Harry," Draco drawled, drawing out the syllables of Harry in a way he knew Harry found new and disconcerting. "You might have said. Don't go getting a bloke's hopes up for nothing."

"What?" Harry breathed, turning bright red. Draco stuck his tongue out at him. "Shut up, Draco," Harry whined, and dragged him to walk faster. Harry had used to be better at comebacks.

"This could take a while," Harry warned, "Seriously," and Draco got out the Marauder's Map and led Harry to the prefect's bathroom. He gave a jaunty wave to the statue of Boris the Bewildered, and Harry whispered "Pine-fresh" to him, making the door open.

"Oh my God," Harry blurted the moment they were inside. "It'd be worth becoming a prefect to use this bathroom!"

"Really?" Draco asked, frowning. He'd been coming here regularly to take his angel's infusion, but he supposed he had grown up with the finer things. Those savage Muggles

surely couldn't have provided Harry with anything like this, white marble with chandeliers, a swimming pool-sized bath, a hundred golden taps that let out different scents of bubbles, and a painting of a mermaid currently sleeping.

"Colloportus," Draco cast. "We shouldn't be disturbed now. But just in case, so we know..." Draco cast Tumultum adux just inside the door. "This is my routine when I bathe in here."

"And that will let us know if someone comes in?"

"Oh, believe me, we'll hear it. Okay, we're here. Do you think it's something here in the room to find, or something about the taking of a bath itself?"

"I don't know," said Harry, and contented himself playing about with the different taps, testing them like an excited first-year while Draco went around inspecting the walls for anything suspicious. Draco grilled the mermaid for information, to the point of oblique threats regarding his ability to cast dark magic to shred canvasses. But all he did was earn himself yet another enemy, before she haughtily flipped her tail and went back to sleep again.

Draco walked back to Harry, who had managed to fill up the whole tub, with a mélange of different types of bubbles that added up to pale bluish. "What's the plan, Chosen One?"

"Don't call me that!" Harry protested.

"You know," Draco mused, "It isn't fair. You gave Diggory the information outright, told him *it's dragons*, period, but he gave you just a clue. A series of hoops to jump through. Really not the fair play he would probably claim it to be, the sod-"

"It's so great that you hate Cedric now," Harry said happily, and raked his hand back through his hair, before looking between himself, Draco, and the water with a gulp.

"So?" Draco prompted. Harry knelt beside the water, swiping his palm through, testing.

"He said take a bath. So I think we'd better take a bath."

"Brilliant deduction," Draco said dryly. "Truly one of the brightest minds of our generation. The Goblet had no *choice* but to take you as a champion. Well, good luck, Harry. You want me to leave the Marauder's Map?"

"What are you talking about? Draco, I can't figure this out myself. You have to do it too."

So Draco's ears hadn't deceived him. Harry Potter was asking him to take a bath together.

"But," Draco said, the height of eloquence. "Um. You and me? Here? A bath? Really?"

"Yeah," said Harry. He'd already rolled up his sleeves to play with the bath. Now he shrugged off his robes, jacket, tie, shoes, and socks, a multicolored patterned pair that looked to be from Dobby. He pulled his shirt over his head and tossed it to the pile of the rest of his clothes without missing a beat. "Come on, Draco. What, are you self-conscious? Shouldn't that be me? You're the one who's probably going to make fun of me."

Draco did not exactly see anything in front of him to make fun of. *Beautiful* was the word that kept going through his stunned mind, of the expanse of smooth pale skin before him that Draco had never seen before, and had never expected to see. Draco had known, of course, that Harry Potter had a body, as all humans generally did, but he'd tried to think about its existence as little as possible, especially recently. But there was no pretending it didn't exist when it was right there before him, not as skinny as Draco might have hoped for his own sanity.

It was a lean athlete's body, with prominent collarbones with their hollows carved in their own white marble, more perfect than any marble in the room. There was the sharpness of Harry's nipples from the coolness of the air, a squareness to his solid shoulders, the light, taut muscular definition already visible in Harry's arms and chest, and lower, not that Draco should be looking... but looking up was worse, because it reminded Draco that this pale beautiful body before him belonged to Harry Potter, adding the sharp tendons of that exposed throat, the curl of dark hair getting too long at the back of his neck, soft and liable to quickly get wet...

"You're going to make fun of me now, aren't you," Harry said gloomily, taking Draco's inspection to have the exact opposite motivation it did.

Draco would have if he could, but there was nothing to mock. There was not a part of Harry he thought he could mention without betraying himself. He'd long resented Harry for being essentially perfect, but it was too much for him to be perfect-*looking* too, with a rose-pink flush creeping over his cheeks and throat and collarbones at the nearby heat. "Just don't, um, get why you think I have to stay..." Draco breathed.

"You should help me figure it out," Harry said, casting him a sideways glance, "You should get in the bath too, come on," and pulled off his trousers, stripping down to black boxers before climbing down into the water. "Ah, that feels weird," Harry added, and a second later, his wet boxers came off under the screen of thick white bubbles and were put on the pile of the rest of his clothes.

Suddenly the question of getting in with Potter became far less academic. It was either leave or get in the bath, one or the other, or Draco's body was about to betray him in a way he felt he could hardly control, knowing Harry was naked now and waiting for him.

For the task, the Triwizard task, he told himself, and took the path of least resistance, stripping down quickly to his underwear, then taking it off under a towel before getting in. He didn't mind getting one of the many towels wet, but he had no intention of going back to Slytherin wet down there. He made himself not look at Harry to see if he was watching. He knew he was a bit taller than Harry, but less broad, and paler yet, to the point it was borderline vampire-like. Plenty of people could get past that, though. Draco had no illusion he wasn't attractive, just like his mother and father were. It was in the Malfoy heritage. No, it wasn't his personal appearance that would embarrass him today, but what Potter might spot on it, if Draco couldn't get his mind in order-

Even as he was thinking that, his eyes drifted to where Harry's fingers were sliding over the surface of the water, playing with the bubbles.

"Hey," Harry said, "Er, thanks for helping," and glided over towards the other side of the bath to join Draco. He raked a wet soapy hand through his hair, before frowning as he felt soap in his hair, and getting just water to run through, slicking it back completely. His face being wet had somehow made his eyes look bigger. They were more prominent still with his forehead and that famous scar on display. But Harry was not some practiced seducer, far from it. Every effect he had on Draco was unintentional, which just added to the indignity of it.

Harry nearly lost his footing coming up to Draco, and lost his glasses in the water. Draco lifted them with his wand, and levitated them over to Harry's pile of clothes. "Shouldn't be wearing them in the bath anyway, Potter- Harry."

"What if there's something I need to see?" Harry asked, then quickly added, "For the task," flush darkening over his chest. His chest kept coming distractingly in and out of sight for Draco, right at the line of the bubbles.

"That's what you've got me for, isn't it?" Draco said, pointing to his own eyes. Harry squinted a bit, but he seemed able to read the gesture from the other side of the bath, from his weak laugh. And then Harry beckoned him to his side. "The egg's over here, actually," he called.

Draco couldn't stop staring at Harry. It would have been humiliating, even if the sight wasn't having an effect on him, one that made him eternally grateful Harry had added bubbles. God forbid Harry decide the clue from Diggory wouldn't work unless they bathed in *clear* water.

The realization that Draco had left his wand over on the other edge of the bath sent him rushing back to get it, and he placed it as close to him on the rim of the bath as possible.

When he looked up from its reassuring dark bend, Harry was watching him with those bare eyes. "You splashed me," he said petulantly, rubbing water and bubbles out of his eyes, eyelashes sticking together darkened, each individual one almost visible, they were so close...

"Gah!" Draco cried out, as Harry splashed him back on purpose. "You- you animal!" Draco yelped, covering his face as he tried to blink away the sting. "You illiterate, barbaric, animal *cretin*!" Harry snorted and splashed him again for good measure. "I am not one of your Weasleys, to engage in snow or *water* fights- stop it! I *will* use dark magic!"

"Go ahead," Harry said, "It's fascinating when you use dark magic," then shut his mouth, flushing darker, as well he should. That was not an appropriate sentiment to be held by the savior of the wizarding world. For the first time in years, concern about corrupting the Gryffindor trio swam to the forefront of Draco's mind. And then he looked at Harry, smirking at him with his body glistening in the water, and he could think of so many ways he could corrupt *this* Gryffindor.

"Then I won't," Draco said, "If you *like* it too much. We're in the same bath, after all, Harry, wouldn't do for you to start getting *excited*," and Harry made a sound like he'd been stabbed.

"I- I wasn't, I didn't mean, oh, God," Harry babbled, covering his face with his hands.

"I was joking?" Draco said uncertainly, a bit stung to see the idea of finding him attractive was that repulsive to Harry. His belief that Severus was always right- well, except for when it

came to the Marauders- was reaffirmed yet again. *Basilisk corpse.* Thinking of that ought to be helping with his own personal issue with excitement. And yet his own act of prying Harry's hands off that mortified face just made it worse, every sensation in his body starting to concentrate under the water, except for the parts where his and Harry's skin touched.

When the dragon kisses the stag...

"Oh, right, sorry," Harry breathed, and seemed to have forgotten why they were there. When Draco pointed at the golden egg, he looked at it like he had never seen it before, then looked back at Draco. Hopefully, he wasn't contemplating splashing Draco again. "It's just- God, Draco, I can't *stand* it, it's you, you're so-"

"I'd try putting it in the water, if I were you," purred a rather familiar voice, which did not do sultry very well.

"It's Myrtle," Draco said helpfully, recognizing the voice even before he saw her spectral form. Merlin, this had to be like Christmas morning for her. Two of her favorite boys in the bath, making her the unimpeded spectator of a personal nirvana.

And Myrtle did look pleased with herself, ignoring Harry's cry of indignation as he squinted in the direction of the blue light she gave off. "Myrtle! I'm- I'm not wearing anything!"

"Neither is he," Myrtle giggled, and gave Draco a saucy little wave with a couple of fingers. "Oh, Harry... Draco's so lovely, isn't he? All pale skin and pale hair, and you all dark and brooding, with those green, green eyes..."

"Did you know he slayed a-" Draco began, only for Harry to shove a hand over his mouth.

"If you say one word, let alone sing," Harry hissed venomously in his ear, "About a Basilisk, I will make sure that-" He seemed to run out of steam when it came to an actual threat. "Something very bad happens to you," he finished lamely.

"Ooh, are you fighting?" Myrtle cooed, floating closer for a better look. "Look at the pair of you! Oh, Draco, you're *touching* him... you like boys, don't you? I heard you talking about them with that awful snotty girl with the buck teeth..."

"Hermione doesn't have buck teeth anymore, Luna fixed them," Draco protested, right as Harry asked,

"Myrtle, what did he say about boys in your bathroom?"

"Traitor," Draco hissed, and poked a finger at Potter's shoulder. Once his fingertips grazed the smooth hollow of Harry's collarbone, he found them disinclined to push with as much force as planned, or leave anytime soon. So he rested his hand on Harry's shoulder with a purposeful air, as if squaring up and presenting them as a united front against the intruder.

"Excellent anti-intruder charm," Harry whispered.

"It doesn't work for *ghosts*!" Draco whispered back, and that was when Myrtle floated in to join them in the bath.

"Oh no, am I a third wheel?" she giggled. "I watch the boys taking baths sometimes, but I've never come to speak to anyone here before. That's because Draco's my friend. He's the nicest boy I've ever met." She sniffed haughtily. "You could learn from him, Harry."

"Okay," Harry said slowly. "So, erm, how can we help you, Myrtle?" He seemed to be counting the seconds until they could make Myrtle go away. At least the ghost's presence had neatly eliminated Draco's personal problem.

"Well, anyway," Myrtle said, "I'd try the egg in the water. That's what Cedric Diggory did."

Harry grabbed the egg from the side. He had to lean a bit, exposing the stretch of his taut wet abdomen as he reached. Draco quickly looked away, only to see Myrtle staring openly and quite shamelessly. *I feel you there, Myrtle.*

Once he was fully back in the water, thankfully not too long for the sake of Draco's sanity, Myrtle told them, "Go on, then... open it under the water!"

Harry lowered the egg down beneath the bubbles, and there was not the wailing sound that Harry had told Draco to expect. Instead, there was the muffled sound of singing. "You need to put your head under, too," Myrtle added with a superior air. "Go on!"

Draco took a deep breath and submerged himself. He forced his eyes open, and his face met Harry's, also opening underwater. Their eyes locked, and Draco had to force himself to listen, when the singing started up again. It was an uninspired piece of lyricism, no information he hadn't known from witnessing the Task in the blue loop. All he really learned was that Harry Potter even looked perfect underwater.

They surfaced after the song ended. Draco wanted to put the sight of Harry pushing his shaggy wet dark hair back out of his eyes into some loop and watch it every day until he died.

"Hear it?" said Myrtle.

"Yeah... 'Come seek us where our voices sound...' and if I need persuading... hang on, I need to listen again..." He looked at Draco. "You coming?"

"This is your bit, Harry. I'm just here to add some visual appeal to the proceedings."

"Oh, you *do*," Myrtle giggled, and Draco smiled at her.

Harry scowled, and muttered, "Don't flirt too much while I'm underwater."

Harry had to do it six times total to have it all memorized, and then he had an infuriating difficulty puzzling it out. Draco was biased to think it easy, since he already knew, but even Myrtle observed how slow Harry was at it. He kept looking plaintively over at Draco to solve it for him.

Finally, he started getting somewhere. "Underwater..." Harry said slowly. "What lives in the lake, apart from the giant squid?"

"Grindylows, you simpleton," Draco said impatiently. "Grindylows and mermaids. How did you get top marks in Defense last year? Don't get me thinking it was a case of nepotism."

"That's it, isn't it?" said Harry excitedly. "The Second Task's to go and find the merpeople in the lake and... and..." He ran quickly out of steam. "Wait, how am I supposed to breathe?"

Draco had his mouth open for a smart comment. But Myrtle cleared her throat, liable to burst into tears at any moment, along with her eponymous moaning. "Tactless!" she exclaimed, and got angrier at their blank looks. "Talking about breathing in front of me!" she said with an ill-portending rising hysteria. "When I can't... when I haven't... not for ages..." She buried her face in her handkerchief and sniffed loudly.

"Myrtle," Draco said, "Come on, just think. Have some perspective. You are in a bath with the best-looking boy in all of fourth year- no, in all of the school. He's powerful. He's a world-class Seeker. He's charismatic, draws people in, and just to be near him is a privilege. Oh, and Harry Potter is here too. So just chill." He jerked his thumb towards Harry. "And enjoy the view."

"Oh, I am..." Myrtle said dreamily, and seemed to zone out at the sight before her, which, admittedly, with Potter would not be a very difficult trap for anyone to fall into.

"What does it mean, do you think, Draco?" Harry asked anxiously. "'We've taken what you'll sorely miss.' It's like they're going to take something of mine, something I have to get back."

"I don't know," Draco said, and then said to hell with repeating the blue loop. He had suffered enough pretending to speculate on information he already knew. "I bet it will be people. That's what you're supposed to care about the most, right? The people in their lives. Maybe they're going to put the people you love the most underwater, and you'll have to go and save them."

Is it strictly people regardless, or did it just happen to be a person that would be most missed for all the champions? Imagine if it's literal, if I *was a champion. I'd like to see them try and put the* talon wand *at the bottom of the Great Lake.*

"Oh!" Harry exclaimed, and then blanched completely, gripping onto the edges of the bath behind him with undue terror. "Wait- does that mean, who we fancy the most or something- who we have the most *romantic* feelings for? How would anyone know that? Would we say, or would there be a spell that would just know who we like-"

"Oh, that's lovely," Myrtle sighed lasciviously.

Draco frowned. "Don't be daft. It says who *you'll* miss the most, not who your dick will miss the most. You can care about people platonically too." *Unless there was far more between you and Ron than I ever suspected. Is* that *what prompted this summer's discovery of your latent bisexuality?* "For you, it will probably be Ron. He's your best friend, isn't he?"

"Oh," Harry said, chewing on his lip, "Yeah," and looked still inexplicably nervous, gazing around restlessly. Maybe he was wondering now how he would keep from drowning Draco's second-favorite Weasley.

"Nebulus," Draco cast, climbing out of the bath, then called, "Accio bathrobe," and wrapped himself in it before looking over in Potter's direction. He could see nothing in the opaque smoke.

"What are you doing? You aren't leaving, are you? Oh, I can't see anything!" Myrtle called in despair, and Draco laughed indulgently.

"Accio bathrobe," he called again, then felt and put it down. "Here, Harry, I put it right behind you, I think. Get out and put it on, then I'll clear the mist. Hey, Myrtle, don't be sad, you know you'll see me and Hermione in your bathroom tomorrow." Suddenly it occurred to Draco. "Hey, Myrtle, all the times I've been having my soaks here, have you been spying on me?"

From somewhere in the fog, a coy little voice called out, "I'll never tell!"

There was some thudding sounds, and then Harry announced, "Okay, I'm ready."

They packed up while Myrtle watched them adoringly, and a look at Draco's watch told him it was definitely past curfew. It was a tighter fit sharing the cloak at this age than as first-years, but they managed. Even if it put them in tight enough proximity for him to tell Harry now smelled very, very good. Would Amortentia now smell like whatever random combination of bubbles Harry had poured in like a simpleton? The indignities never ended.

They checked the Marauder's Map, and found Filch and Mrs. Norris in Filch's office, and Peeves a floor above in the trophy room. Draco insisted Harry be the one to take the cloak to his common room, and allow Draco to sneak back the rest of the way on his own. Severus tended to be more forgiving than McGonagall. But Harry stopped them, to point out something strange on the map. "Look, there's someone in your godfather's office. But it's not him- it says Bartemius Crouch!" *Took long enough for you to notice it's not Moody's name where the fake Moody is. Observational skills of a gnat, Gryffindors.* "Didn't Percy say he was ill? Do you think he's trying to get something on you?"

"Who knows," said Draco, stifling a yawn, only to have to follow after in his slippers, as Harry began to drag the cloak down in the wrong direction.

"We have to see what he's up to!" Harry insisted, and could not be dissuaded. "Come on, it's so near your dorm, I'll just drop you right after, okay? Barely a detour."

"Why are you like this?" Draco hissed. "I am never helping you with anything ever again!"

"But aren't you curious?" Harry whispered, green eyes gleaming as they hurried, and Draco tried not to let those eyes distract him enough to run into a wall.

"NO!"

And then, halfway down a staircase, Harry was the one to get distracted, trapping himself in a trick step. "Are you serious?" Draco hissed, and Harry just made a mournful noise and tried to pull out his leg. All he managed to do was spill his bag all over the stairs, and then himself,

sending him sprawling down out of the cloak, out of Draco's reach. The sound of the rattling golden egg wasn't exactly soft, either. "Potter, you moron!"

Draco went down the stairs under the cloak, grumbling and picking up a dazed Harry's things for him. He made sure to get the Marauder's Map and erase it, before offering Harry a hand up. "Harry," Harry said dazedly, "Call me Harry."

"Right now, you're lucky I'm calling you anything but *blunderbus*-"

"PEEVES!" And there was Filch shuffling onto the scene. Lovelier yet.

"What's this racket? Wake up the whole castle, will you? I'll have you, Peeves, I'll have you, you'll... and what is this?"

Seemed that somehow Draco had forgotten to put back the *great golden egg* into the bag.

"Oh, Salazar, bloody hell," Draco groaned into Harry's ear. "How did I miss the egg..." They watched as Filch monologued towards an imagined Peeves, who in his mind seemed the obvious culprit of egg-thieving, and whom Filch would now be able to triumphantly have expelled from the school, once and for all. "Shouldn't we make a break for it?"

"The egg," Harry hissed, "We have to see if they can figure out it's mine... oh, no..."

Draco brightened at the same time. "Oh, look, it's Severus," he said, and was half-tempted to throw off the cloak and stroll right out.

"No," Harry hissed, "Not great! He hates *me*, remember? And do you think your godfather wants to see us sneaking around together at night, in- in *bathrobes*?"

No, that did not sound like a sight calculated to gratify one Severus Snape.

There was a great confusion then, as Severus was annoyed about someone having broken into his office, and Filch confusing that with the matter of the egg. They kept bickering, while Harry shuffled closer to Draco under the cloak. It was getting warm underneath, from their collective body warmth. Otherwise, they might have been cold, wet in slippers on the Hogwarts stone.

"Filch, I don't give a damn about that wretched poltergeist, it's my office that's-"

And then there was staff-tapping, not ideal at the best of times, and Crouch was one of Draco's least favorite users of that technique. Crouch came limping up towards the stairs with a ratty old cloak over his nightshirt. "Pajama party, is it?" he said, and Draco had the bad feeling he was about to witness the infuriating sight of someone addressing his godfather with disrespect.

"Professor Snape and I heard noises, Professor," said Filch. "Peeves the poltergeist, throwing things around as usual- and then Professor Snape discovered that someone had broken into his off-"

"Shut up!" Snape hissed to Filch.

Crouch walked closer, gazing up the stairs, that hideous false eye did its jerking all about, first on Severus and then Draco and Harry. The way Harry stiffened, Draco had to stifle a laugh. "Don't worry," he whispered in Harry's ear, "We're invisible," and Harry didn't relax.

"Not to him," Harry hissed, "Not to that *eye*," and sure enough, Crouch was staring right at them now.

Draco expected that to be just about the end to his natural existence, but Crouch finally just turned away and began harassing Severus. Which was wrong on so many levels, but Draco could barely hear them over the relief of not being exposed. "Why didn't he turn us in?" he hissed to Harry, and Draco put a finger to his lips.

Because he wants you succeeding in the tournament to lure you to your doom, obviously, *now shut up!*

Eventually, Crouch managed to wrest the egg from a sour Filch, while a no less bitter-looking Severus stalked in the opposite direction back towards the dungeons. "Let's go!" Draco hissed, "Get the egg back from him tomorrow," but Crouch was limping up the stairs right to them. "We're going past him! Now! Fuck him! If he hexes us, he hexes us!"

"What?" Harry asked, mystified, but let Draco drag him right past Crouch, as if they had never seen him seeing them. They heard Crouch clear his throat behind them, but no steps or curses followed them on their way down to the dungeons.

Harry insisted on walking Draco to his common room, since they knew for sure Severus would be awake. They lingered at the entrance, faces close under the cloak. "You really think it will be a person I'd most miss?" Harry whispered, and Draco shrugged.

"What do I look like, a-" *Time-traveler,* Draco tried to joke, and the Langlock cut off even that. "A seer?" he joked weakly, but Harry laughed. Somehow he always seemed to laugh at Draco's jokes.

"Thank you, Draco," was all Harry whispered back, and kissed him on the cheek before taking the cloak and racing back out of the dungeons.

Expecting your Patronum

Chapter Notes

Hey all, to answer a question, yes, the rating of this fic will definitely go up eventually ^^ Anyway, enjoy!

Playlist

Draco had done his part helping Harry figure out the clue, though it seemed to him Harry could have done all that just as well without him. But Crouch never said anything about what he'd seen, and surprisingly enough, he seemed to have gotten *less* nasty to Draco in Defense. If anything, he was now harsher on Vince and Greg. It was a trend that had started, come to think of it, around the detention where Crouch had seen Harry visiting him. Maybe after that first time he happened upon them, and bizarrely treated it like some assault attempt, he'd come around to the realization that Draco actually was friends with *the* Harry Potter. And that must grant Draco far more largesse, if Crouch had realized Draco would be integral to Harry being successful in the Triwizard Tournament, getting Harry to the Portkey first. Whatever it was, Draco was not complaining.

Draco had told himself he wouldn't intervene, but he quickly got sick of listening to all four of his friends fretting after how Harry could do the Second Task. Eventually, when Harry asked McGonagall for a pass to use the Restricted Section, and it turned out to be a blanket permission for three books, Draco offered Harry a deal. "Tell you what, Harry," Draco said, making sure to offer it when they were alone in the library and Hermione couldn't interfere. "If you get the books *I* want out of the Restricted Section, and give them to me, then I will tell you right away exactly what you need to do in order to breathe underwater for an hour."

Harry looked doubtful. "If you know that, why wouldn't you just have told me sooner?"

Draco rolled his eyes. "Because I thought you'd run and go tell Diggory, obviously. I was going to tell you last minute so you couldn't, but now I see a chance to get something out of it, so..." Draco was rather proud of that lie's plausibility. "Take the note. Do we have a deal?"

"Yes," Harry said, "Of course," and then squinted down at the paper.

First choice- *Moste Foule Magicks with the Blood of the Slain*

Second- *The Nightshade Guide to Necromancy*

Third- *The Lost Art of Necromancy*

Fourth- *The Imperius Curse and How to Abuse It*

Alternative- Any texts about blood magic involving corpses

"Um," Harry said after a long pause. "Er, Draco. Wow."

Draco frowned at him, gesturing impatiently. "Did you expect something different? Go!"

In about half an hour, Harry came back with copies checked out of *Moste Foule Magicks with the Blood of the Slain, The Nightshade Guide to Necromancy,* and *Moste Dark Blood Rituals of the Demon Goddess Hecate*. "Um," Harry said, looking unspeakably traumatized. "I couldn't find the last two, so I just got you another book with a title like the first. It seemed along the same lines..."

"Perfect!" Draco said excitedly, and seized them all and shoved them in his bag before Harry could change his mind. "Great job! Hey, high five!" he said, holding up a hand for Harry to slap.

Harry just looked like he was questioning his entire existence. "Draco, I don't want to do a high five with you for *books about blood sacrifice.*" Draco just kept his hand up, and reluctantly, Harry leaned forward and slapped it. "Okay, fine, now tell me, how am I going to-"

"Gillyweed," Draco said nonchalantly, "It will make you grow gills and flippers, it will be perfect, not dangerous, you can chew a dose to last an hour. I can get some from Severus's stores, he won't mind." The fact that he remembered Rita Skeeter's article in the blue loop about the Second Task, mentioning Harry had used gillyweed? Well, that just made all their lives easier.

Harry didn't seem surprised that Draco could simply deliver the answer like that, like some deus ex machina. Hermione, though, was amazed. "How did you know that?" she demanded, looking jealous. "You're not even that good at Herbology!"

Ron sniggered, while Luna nodded in agreement. "Hey!" Draco protested. "I am at Potions, okay? Severus told me about it when he gave me a tour of his storerooms."

Hermione accepted that, and they went up to work on the Wolfsbane together, though she seemed a bit huffy she hadn't been the one to come up with the solution. Draco made a point of being extra attentive and complimentary to her in the aftermath.

He didn't find the ritual that Periander had used, nor anything that leaped out at him as something Aunt Bella might have been involved in to contaminate the talon wand, but he did find all sorts of interesting things. He nearly hurt his hand copying down pages from the thick books he might want to see later, and ran out of Polaroid slips from all the pictures he took of them.

The first real snag came a few days later. Draco was consulting the Marauder's Map for them to sneak out of Myrtle's bathroom, and saw the dots that said *Cedric Diggory* and *Harry Potter* together in the trophy room. "Oh, *hell* no," Draco breathed, "No time to explain," and raced out of the bathroom like a bat on fire, already fearing he'd be too late to stop it.

He would have almost preferred walking in on some passionate tryst, rather than what he found as he busted into the trophy room: Harry and Diggory standing there a few feet apart, the air calm and civil, with Harry saying, "I really appreciate the help you gave me with the egg, so I wanted to tell you what I've figured out about the Second Task since then. See, when the song says what you'll miss the most, we think that means..."

"Are you kidding me?" Draco demanded, and both Harry and Diggory got oh-shit looks on their faces as Draco stormed his way in, using a Ventus to slam the door behind him. "Are you actually fucking kidding me? Again?"

"It's only fair," Harry said defensively, "He helped me too," and Draco wanted to tear out his hair. He tore the S clasp out of it and ran his hands through it angrily.

"Once! This would make twice from you! You were already even, you don't need to do it again!" Draco protested, ignoring the face Diggory was making at him. "And this is different! Dragons was one thing, Charlie Weasley told you that. But now you're going to tell him the things *I* figured out for you?" Or told him from the blue loop, but same difference. "You can't be serious!"

"Maybe we don't all have friends as *clever* as you, Malfoy," Diggory spat, with an emphasis on the word clever that made it clear he was mentally substituting a very different word. "It *is* fair to even the playing field, with all the things you've learned from *your* family-"

"Are you going to tell him that thing about the lake, too?" Draco demanded, and Harry nodded, like some cruel oblivious god nonchalantly dooming one of his followers to be slain. Even if he could have claimed they needed to not help Diggory, to keep Diggory from winning the cup alongside him, and save his life- neither of them would have ever believed him at this point.

"I'm sorry, Draco," Harry said earnestly, and looked very handsome and noble, and yet his face had never looked more punchable. "I'm glad you want me to win the cup so much. But some things are more important than winning."

"I could just curse you silent," Draco spat, which could hardly help Cedric's opinion of Draco. "You know I could. Lock up your tongue until you agreed not to-"

"We both know you won't," Harry said calmly.

"Then just- just- just forget about any more *help* from me!" Draco sputtered. "For the rest of the tournament! Diggory would sure like *that*! Tell him *my* information, and I won't even bloody *speak* to you, not one word, till the whole Second Task is over, *Potter*!"

With how covetous Harry could be of Draco's attention, Draco had thought that might sway him if nothing else. But Harry just squared his shoulders and got his self-sacrificing, Basilisk-

fighting look. "I'm sorry, Draco. It's just the right thing to do."

"Oh, and forget about *ever* getting your map back!" Draco screamed, "VENTUS!" and the door nearly came off its hinges as he stormed back out.

Being forced to give Harry the silent treatment out of offended pride was bad enough. But Draco actually broke down in tears, and had to be comforted by an exasperated but fond Hermione, when their first batch of Wolfsbane came out wrong.

"It was always going to be difficult for us to make by ourselves," she told him, and Draco tried not to snap at her. He managed, but it was a close thing. At least he had planned this to be a surprise, so Sirius and Remus weren't caught looking forward to being sent the potion and having to be disappointed. He and Hermione started again from scratch. It was a good thing they'd bought a lot of ingredients, and Draco had stolen a great deal from the Manor.

One item robbed from the Manor that proved more successful was the dragon decal. Its presence baffled his dormmates. The thing seemed to have taken a particular dislike to Blaise, sending the non-deadly flames his way at any opportunity. It was a constant reminder of Dobby's impending birthday, so Draco eventually ordered a box big enough to put it in and wrap, invited the Gryffindor trio and Luna, and planned a surprise party. He invited Harry through Hermione.

Draco had Luna go down and ask Dobby to come to the trophy room at 8, while Ron snuck past a distracted Dobby and snuck out a cake, that two house elves less hateful towards Dobby had agreed to make and then keep secret from him. Ron brought the cake up to the trophy room, where the five of them magically moved the trophies to the side and set up a party area, with conjured decorations and balloons in red and gold- Draco's insistence, since Dobby was clearly a Gryffindor elf. The gold foil and banners made all the gold trophies look like part of the decoration too.

They set the small pile of presents in the center of the room, beside a small stand with its trophy replaced by the large pink-iced raspberry jelly layer cake that read HAPPY BIRTHDAY DOBBY in big letters on the top. Then they sat in a circle and waited. Draco was bizarrely nervous. He'd never given a surprise party before, hadn't even known they existed until he saw one on a Muggle program that the Grangers had been watching once. It was awful, not knowing whether or not the surprise had worked.

The surprise had worked. When Dobby Apparated in, looking at the turquoise watch on his wrist, he looked around confused for a moment, then cried out in shrill surprise when he saw the HAPPY BIRTHDAY DOBBY banner in red and gold overhead, and the cake that said the same. Belatedly, the five of them jumped up and shouted, "SURPRISE!" just like on the Muggle television.

With that accomplished, Draco hurried to push a page from the Malfoy genealogy register into Dobby's hand, in case Dobby didn't even know this was his birthday. "Look, Dobby, I found this, it says the day you were born, it's what gave me the idea..."

"Dobby knew this date," Dobby said, marble eyes gone huge as saucers, "But- but- Dobby never dreamed that Dobby would *celebrate* a birthday. Elves do not ever... but you are all

here... Harry Potter... Ronald Weasley... Hermione Granger... Luna Lovegood... Draco Malfoy..." With each name, his big eyes filled with more tears. "You are *all* here to *celebrate Dobby's birthday*?"

"Oh, no, Dobby, don't cry," said Luna, and went over and gave him a hug. "You helped with me and Hermione's birthdays, it's only fair we celebrate yours as well."

"Dobby has never had a birthday party," Dobby said, voice wobbly as he wiped below his eyes, small wrinkled hands waving in the air once Luna let him go. He looked more stunned yet when Ron got up and handed him a balloon shaped like a golden lion, which pranced about and roared in the air when he touched it.

"Well, now you have," Draco said, hoping they hadn't offended Dobby, and that these were tears of happiness. "So should we all sing Happy Birthday?"

Hermione put on the candles and lit them with a spell, and they all sang, Dobby standing motionless with his balloon. He had to wait a while, as Luna sang her two extra verses, and then Harry pushed the cake towards Dobby. "You blow out the candles and make a wish," Harry prompted, and closing his eyes, Dobby seemed to think very hard, before blowing out the candles.

"Dobby wished-"

"No, Dobby, if you say it won't come true," Hermione said hastily, taking off the candles and cutting it for everyone. Dobby settled down with them, holding his balloon with one hand and his fork for cake in another, with a disbelieving look on his face like he had died and gone to heaven.

When they gave presents, the Gryffindors had gone in together on one, Luna on another, and Draco with the last two. The Gryffindors had bought Dobby a very nice warm Gryffindor scarf. Luna had gotten him a Sneakoscope, since the other elves didn't seem to like him much. Draco gave him a Polaroid of the five of them on the Hogwarts Express last year. Dobby seemed overjoyed at the image, and said he would hang it up where he slept so he could think of his friends. His elation, it seemed, was not just for Harry and Draco anymore, but all of them.

When Dobby opened the second package, though, his dreamy elation fell away. "Dobby?" Draco said hesitantly. "Don't you recognize it?" He touched it, and it made flames in the air that made Ron jump away. "It's a dragon. It was on my door since I was little, in the Manor. It glows up neon in the dark. I thought you could put it on your wall along with the picture, if there's space... you can make it stop glowing with a spell. I just remember you saying you liked it, so..."

"No," Dobby said. By now, his eyes were dry, but they were taking on a distant look instead. "Dobby was remembering the last time Dobby saw that door, when Draco Malfoy was-" He caught Draco's glare and didn't finish that sentence. "But it is a fine present. Dobby will cherish it."

There was a distinct sadness in the air now, there, so much that Draco regretted having not just given him the picture. "Dobby," Hermione said, "Does it make you sad, being reminded of when you lived at Malfoy Manor?" Dobby nodded weakly, putting the dragon decal aside. "Dobby... would you mind telling- just if you don't mind- why you were freed? I've always wondered."

Dobby looked at Draco, and Draco was tempted to tell him to shut up, but that would be defeating the whole point of this night. Dobby was a free elf. He shouldn't be taking orders from a Malfoy anymore, or letting Malfoys intimidate him into not telling their family secrets. "Go on, Dobby. It's your story to tell. If you want."

Dobby took a deep breath. "Dobby would like to tell, since Dobby is with friends. It is the worst and best memory Dobby has." Draco just willed him not to mention Draco's part in it more than necessary. "Dobby does not want to bore Harry Potter. Harry Potter is a great wizard who-"

"Oh, don't worry, Dobby," Draco drawled. "It's painful, yes, but not boring." He drew his wand as a kind of show and tell object for Dobby, and put it in the circle between the six of them on their cushions.

"Dobby will start at the beginning," Dobby said, staring down at the talon wand anxiously. "Dobby was minding Dobby's business one day, when Draco Malfoy called Dobby to open the cellars for him. Dobby could not, because Lucius Malfoy had ordered no. But Draco Malfoy wanted to find a wand very much, to start work for his school early. So Dobby helped him find one."

All their gazes went to the talon wand. "That's how he got it?" Ron breathed, shocked.

"They all know about the wand, Dobby," Draco sighed. "Tell them what happened."

"Dobby had cleaned a room one day and saw a wand, so Dobby remembered. Dobby took Draco Malfoy to the room, and he broke the glass and took this wand." Dobby gestured downwards. "And there was a large black explosion, and Dobby was scared, but Draco Malfoy said everything was alright. But it was not alright, when Lucius Malfoy found out about the wand."

"You remember?" Draco asked weakly. "When I met you at Ollivander's?" He realized after that he had ruined his silent treatment of Potter, but it didn't much matter.

"You were crying," Harry said softly. "And you couldn't breathe. I was so worried. I guess you must have been having a panic attack?"

"Lucius Malfoy was very angry. He said that Dobby was disrespectful and endangered Lucius Malfoy's son, so he would not have Dobby at the Manor. Lucius Malfoy gave Dobby clothing, and so Dobby was free!" Dobby's grave tone lifted at the end, though the humans around him looked grim still.

"How did he know it was you?" Hermione asked with her damn logic, and Draco closed his eyes. When he opened them, Dobby was looking at him.

"Go ahead," Draco sighed, as a story he had thought his friends would never hear came roaring up. "It's your story to tell, Dobby, not mine."

"Lucius Malfoy was very angry at Draco Malfoy, so he took Draco Malfoy to the cellars and hurt him," Dobby said, grimacing at the memory. "But Draco Malfoy would not tell his father how he got the wand." Draco felt shocked glances on him, Potter's most of all, green eyes suddenly at their most piercing when they had to reevaluate what they had thought they knew about him. "So Lucius Malfoy summoned all of the elves in the Manor. He said Draco Malfoy had to say who. But Draco Malfoy would not say, and so Lucius Malfoy was beating him and beating him."

"Draco, your father beat you?" Hermione exclaimed. "That's horrible!"

"Plenty of parents use corporal discipline on children, it's normal," Draco said defensively.

"*How* was he beating him?" Hermione asked Dobby fiercely.

"With hexes, Hermione Granger," Dobby said, "And with the walking stick on his back. But Draco Malfoy would not say, so Dobby thought he should do what Draco Malfoy wanted and stay silent. But then Draco Malfoy was getting very sick from the beating, so Dobby could not watch, and Dobby told Lucius Malfoy the truth."

"You took a beating from your father to protect Dobby?" Harry asked in wonder. "As a *first-year*?"

Because I thought he was needed to keep you alive and beat Voldemort. It wasn't for him. He wouldn't become my friend until second-year. Back then, I still just thought of him as filthy vermin.

"It was only fair," Draco said uncomfortably. It was true, even if he would never have thought that back then. "I had been the one to order Dobby to do it and get him in trouble. It wouldn't be fair to let him take the punishment. I didn't know my father would just *free* him. I thought... I don't know. It wasn't a big deal."

The others let the subject die, and the party gradually regained its former festive cheer with the aid of Butterbeers. But when everyone was leaving, Harry volunteered to stay back with Draco and clean up, moving the trophy cases back into place. "Draco," Harry said, taking his hand and staring into his eyes intently. "Draco, was that story really all true?"

Draco shrugged defensively. "I mean, you can call me a liar if you want, but you'd also be calling Dobby a liar, and that would break his heart, the great Harry Potter, so..."

Harry grabbed his other hand, standing very close, like he couldn't get close enough to Draco, couldn't do enough to keep him there focused on him. "I just don't understand the way you act... the things you do... I never do. Ron says you're just unpredictable, but it's more than that. You don't *want* people to understand. It's like when you never told anyone you almost gave up your wand, to help Hagrid save Buckbeak. You throw all the dark bad things in our faces, and everything good you try and hide. It's so backwards..."

"What's backwards," Draco said, trying for levity, "Is *you* trying to analyze *me*..."

"I don't get it, Draco. Why do you always want me to think you're so much worse than you are? How is it you can be so kind to some people, and so cruel to others?"

"Easy. I'm kind to those who deserve kindness, and cruel to those who deserve cruelty." It was like a trick question.

"And you just get to pick who's deserving of what?" Harry said doubtfully. "Who are you to choose that? What are you, a god?"

"Maybe," Draco laughed. The blue loop did give him a different perspective. Whether it made him more or less well-suited to judge the red line, who could say? "I just do my best, alright?"

"Yeah, with blood magic?" Harry kept prodding. "Draco, what were those books for?"

"It's just for fun," Draco lied, and seized on Hermione for inspiration. "Just a bit of light reading. I've never done actual blood magic, and I never will-"

"Draco," Harry said rolling his eyes, "I know you have," and Draco panicked.

"Um, okay, there was the once," he babbled. "But I didn't know what I was getting into, I wasn't told there'd be blood involved. I was coerced, if anything *I* was the victim there..."

"I mean," Harry said, looking less placated, "That Hermione told me you used to use blood magic all the time to get into Grimmauld Place. What was the other time?"

"Oh, entering Grimmauld? I didn't even think that counted," Draco babbled, "And I mean, what is the line that demarcates what is and is not blood magic, anyway? It's so arbitrary. We're all mammals with blood pumping through our veins, so every spell is technically blood magic..."

"I don't know," Harry said slowly. "I would define blood magic as just *any magic that uses blood in it.*"

"Um," Draco said, "Yes, you might have me there. Lovely talk, Potter, let's do it again sometime," and made for the exit.

"Draco!" Harry yelled, and Draco froze, thinking he was about to be interrogated and exposed.

But Harry just sort of pouted at him and whined, "You promised you'd call me Harry..."

"Okay, fine, goodnight, *Harry.*"

Luckily for Draco, there was a boy about who was far more accepting of Draco's interest in blood magic: one Theodore Nott, who thought any investigation in the topic would deepen

their knowledge and be fruitful in uncovering exactly what Aunt Bella might have done to the talon wand. That academic justification, though, quickly collapsed, as Theo's sheer interest in the subject led him far afield from the wand issue, and towards a general impressed perusal of the books Draco had gotten from Potter.

Apart from their new hoard of books, the weeks that followed were less eventful, with no blood magic actually performed. At least Draco did have cause to be glad he'd not taken Care of Magical Creatures, when he heard they were working with unicorns. The stories of unicorns greatly favoring virgins were false, but they could definitely be more ornery towards those who weren't. Draco didn't know if he counted, in a body that had never so much as been kissed. He was falling quickly behind his blue loop self in that department. But best not to risk it.

Soon after, there was the letter Theo had gotten back from Ollivander. Apparently using the Malfoy name had yielded results. They sat together over it at the Slytherin table in the Great Hall before dinner, while Draco sipped happily at the iced lychee juice that Dobby had magicked up for him.

"'The other three wands created with this core also have the same bent shape, for an unknown reason'," Theo read, only loud enough for Draco's ears. "If he said it's his father who made the wands, it makes sense he doesn't know why. Let's see. He says, 'They were never sold. Upon the attempt of the Malfoy family to visit the shop during the past Easter, I found that all three of these wands had melted to soot in their boxes upon inspection'- Salazar, Draco, what does that mean?"

"Oh, really?" Draco said distractedly, yawning and wishing they could go back to the blood magic books. "I shouldn't be surprised. I guess it's because the talon wand didn't want competition. Funny it considers the other core ones the same. He's lucky all the wands in his shop didn't disintegrate."

Theo looked genuinely shaken for the first time, so Draco had to explain what had happened on the visit before that to Ollivander's, where they'd made it to the alley and experienced that effect on wands intended to replace the talon wand. It took some time for Draco to realize that Theo was less disturbed by the strangeness of this, and more by Draco's breezy, accepting attitude. "This is just standard for you. That didn't frighten you?"

"Whatever," Draco said, giving him a Severus eye roll. "I don't get frightened, Theo, I'm the one who frightens people, it's the way of things. Now is there anything actually interesting in there?"

"He says that his method of trying to replace your wand was the use of those other three," Theo said, looking a bit ashen-faced. "So that makes sense that they... and he says he doesn't know about the origin of the dragon heartstring for the wands, since they were made before his time, but the wood just seems to be of common origin. It might be an idea to write back, and see if he could track about the dragon for us..."

"No need," Draco said, enjoying being mysterious for Theo. "I happen to have an excellent source when it comes to dragons. I'll handle it."

If Harry didn't find out, track Charlie down in Romania, and feed him to one of his dragons before he could answer.

Theo just gave him a look with those sharp blue eyes, as if to say he was being far less impressive than he liked to think, and finished reading the letter, with the only part to trip him up an inquiry about Mother's hand. "You said that the wand burned hands that tried to take it from you," Theo said slowly, "Mainly by Expelliarmus. And Ollivander is wondering if your mother's hand has healed yet."

"No," Draco said, finishing his juice and yawning again. "I don't know if it ever will."

"So it's like a brand," Theo said, frowning. "The talon brand."

"You know," Draco drawled, propping his chin on his hand to smirk at Theo properly, "I rather like the sound of that. If nothing else, though, you've given me a name for it. It will certainly, no pun intended, help me with my *branding*."

Theo's brow furrowed. "So what is this brand like, exactly?"

Draco was tempted to call Karkaroff over from where he'd just arrived at the high table and ask him to take off his gloves for a demonstration. "Here, give me your hand," Draco said, and carefully traced the shape of the talon brand over Theo's palm for him.

When he looked at Theo, though, Theo wasn't watching. Instead, he'd noticed Cedric Diggory, standing above them with a grimace on his face. Diggory's eyes were locked unhappily on their hands, as if observing something indecent.

"Diggory," Draco sighed, dropping Theo's hand. "I know it's difficult for a Hufflepuff, but your table is two down. No shame in difficulty recalling, everyone's intellect is... diversely allocated. At least where fate denied you sense, it bequeathed you looks." He ran his eyes up and down Diggory in crude assessment, then scoffed. "Well, *somewhat*-"

Diggory just turned on his heel and stalked over to his own table without a word.

They had a fine birthday party for Luna not long after Dobby's, and Draco and Luna delivered Harry a fine Valentine on the day of love, as was tradition. This year, they upgraded from a singing songbird to five enchanted frogs, who made a pyramid before launching into their merry song at dinner in the Great Hall. While Draco had been working with Hermione on the Wolfsbane Potion, Luna had been working on the enchantment, and she did not disappoint.

The frogs were each a different color of the rainbow, and they all belted out the song with great aplomb. Once again, Harry, Ron, and Seamus's attempts to curse them away were unsuccessful, as they delivered Draco and Luna's most recent musical composition. Like last year, Luna got the first verse, and Draco got the second.

Oh, I am but a humble darkness-dweller

A simple fool who never found a feller

But one day in that late fantastic June

I found a hero who could make me swoon.

His name was Harry Potter, and he saved

All the dungeons from an early grave

With that noble silver stag he showed them

Now I'm the one expecting your Patronum.

Oh, I am but a humble suitor, Potter

Who can't help but observe, you've gotten hotter

And though you ignored last year's invitation

I'm telling you, your hair is quite amazing

A mane resistant to the laws of nature

Surely crowns a head that fortune favors

Even if small bugs grow in that abyss

I'm expecting your Patronum, with a kiss.

Expecting and expecting your Patronum

Even if your touch will be my own end

Because I'm your true love, though your tormentor

For alas, Potter, I am... a Dementor!

Draco was on cloud nine in the aftermath of this year's Valentine's prank. He thought he might have outdone even the Ballad of the Basilisk, with the exciting late plot twist that the suitor was not a Slytherin saved by Potter last year, but one of the Dementors of Azkaban himself. He got congratulations from all four houses, for once. He nodded without confirming or denying his crime, although Theo was so certain it had been Draco, he called Draco Dementor to his face for days after.

Otherwise, Draco thought he had escaped scot-free, as none of his friends nor even Severus said anything about it after. But there was one noble champion racing to come to Harry's aid, and it was, well, a champion.

Draco left Ancient Runes the next day, happily anticipating an afternoon off now that he'd been banned for life from Divination, only to find Cedric Diggory waiting for him. He pulled Draco around the corner and behind a statue, before Draco could protest.

"Diggory, I didn't think you had it in you, you sly dog," Draco drawled. "But what would poor Miss Chang say? She's already suffered enough at my hands, getting destroyed at Quidditch-"

"Shut up, I need to talk to you about Harry," Diggory said, and looked disinclined to let Draco go without hearing him out.

"Fine," Draco said, crossing his arms and rolling his eyes, expecting it to be about the fight he'd witnessed, over Harry helping Cedric with the task. Or maybe there was information to share in turn. "What is it?"

"You really have to stop doing this to him if you don't want him."

"What? Doing what to who? Has whatever minute quantity of cerebrum subsisting in that head finally given up in despair and exited through your ears-"

"You need to stop leading Harry on," Diggory interrupted, "It's cruel, you know he likes you, and you just play around with him for fun? Harry's a really good person. He doesn't deserve anyone to toy around with him the way you do."

"Wait," Draco said slowly. "What do you mean, I *know* he likes me? I don't know that."

"You," Diggory said, "Are supposed to be one of the cleverest people in the school. Don't try and act like you could also be one of *the* most oblivious. I thought it was obvious even before he and I became champions and had to spend more time together. It just got more obvious after. And it's not like the entire school didn't hear you got caught in his bed and mistaken for Sirius Black-"

"That doesn't mean *he* likes *me*, though," Draco argued, sense of reality disintegrating, as Diggory argued with such conviction for such manifestly impossible truths.

"*He likes you*. He knows you like boys, and you're not with anyone, and you're friends. You send him Valentines every year. Joke or not, they're still Valentines. You make dirty jokes at him. I heard you went to Hogsmeade together, and I bet he wanted to go to the Yule Ball with you. You flirt with other boys, but you still flirt with Harry all the time-"

"I do not *flirt with Harry*!" Draco yelled, shaking with anger. "Harry could never like me! You don't know him, you don't know me, so don't act like you do! I *know* he just sees me as a friend, I talked to someone far older and cleverer than you and he was sure of it-"

"Wait," Diggory said slowly. "You really didn't know, did you? How self-centered can one person be? Bloody hell. Whether or not you cast the Dark Mark, Draco, you are one of the worst people I have ever met."

"Are you not taking your father into consideration?" Draco called after him, but Diggory just kept striding away down the corridor. Draco sagged against the statue and put his head in his hands.

Diggory was wrong, of course. Who should Draco listen to, a dumb Hufflepuff who hated him, or his own godfather? Diggory just hated Draco and wanted any excuse to hate him more, so he'd seen the Valentine and ran with it, not understanding it was just a joke tradition. He thought the evil filthy Slytherin had been slutting around, trying to corrupt the golden boy, did he? Well, if Draco had been- he didn't think he'd ever *flirted*, but if he had, it didn't matter. Harry only saw him as a friend. He was sure of that.

He was sure until the 23rd of February, the night before the Second Task. He was sitting in the library with his friends just before curfew. They were trying to distract Harry from his upcoming ordeal by helping Luna cram for her upcoming Potions theory exam. And then a twin pair of shadows fell over their books, one whose cheery voices sounded wrong in the hushed library environment. "What're you two doing here?" Ron asked.

"Looking for Hermione," said George. "McGonagall wants her. We figured she'd be in the library."

"Why?" said Hermione, and Draco had a sinking feeling he already knew.

"Dunno... she was looking a bit grim, though," said Fred.

"We're supposed to take you down to her office," said George.

"Just her?" Draco asked, sure they'd gotten it wrong. "Not anyone else? Even your brother?"

"Nope," Fred said, "Just Hermione. Come on, let's go."

They led her out, and Draco was startled to find all their faces looking mortified. "What if it's about the Wolfsbane?" Harry hissed. There went keeping that from Ron and Luna.

Their shocked faces, and the questions they no doubt had, were preempted by Theo's soft tenor voice saying, "Draco, your godfather needs to see you in his office now."

"What?" Draco said. "There must be some kind of mistake..."

"No, I'm sure," Theo said, and Draco got up like he was walking to his execution.

"Don't worry, Draco!" Harry hissed in his ear before he left. "There's no way your godfather would punish you too harshly for making a *potion*!"

With Hermione and Draco the ones pulled, Harry had naturally assumed they'd been caught making the Wolfsbane potion. The myrrh for that potion might curdle if left unattended all night.

"Theo, you'd better tell me why he needs me," Draco sighed, and Theo just shrugged, the very picture of aloof and uninvolved while Draco's world was collapsing.

Draco let himself into Severus's office in a hurry, only to stop dead when he saw not just Severus but Dumbledore there waiting for him. Draco knew then, though he didn't want to believe it was true, if only for the sake of the Wolfsbane. He would have checked it last night, if he'd had the slightest clue that he could be the one chosen for...

"Severus?" Draco asked, hoping he'd been told on by Trelawney and was getting expelled for performing blood magic on one of his professors, which, alright, reasonable. "What's going on?"

"Draco," Dumbledore said gently, taking him the shoulder and leading him around to their side of the desk. "It must not have escaped your attention that tomorrow is the day of the Second Task, of the Triwizard Tournament. You have been selected to be a part of this task."

"Just me?" Draco said nonsensically, wondering if he wasn't the hostage. Maybe he was some kind of secret Grindylow-hunter or something. Even that made more sense than being the person *Harry Potter* would miss the most in the world-

"No," Dumbledore said, "One for every champion. The others are in Professor McGonagall's office, waiting. But your godfather insisted he had the right to see you and speak to you before anything was done to you. Severus, I do assure you, it's all perfectly safe..."

"People die in Triwizard tournaments," Severus said tightly.

"Champions die," Dumbledore corrected mildly. "Draco, it is quite simple. You and the other three will be taken hostage by the merpeople in the Great Lake. It will be the job of each champion to save their own hostage. You will be unconscious for the whole process, but will see and breathe again perfectly fine as soon as you are above the water."

"Who?" Draco asked, hoping against hope that Krum really overvalued their flying sessions together, or that Diggory was just the world's biggest masochist. "Which champion has to save me?"

Dumbledore frowned as if surprised Draco had to ask the question. "Harry Potter," he said, and Severus leaned back in his chair and shut his eyes.

"No," Draco whispered. "*No*. Something is wrong, you picked the wrong person..."

"It was determined magically," Dumbledore said gently. "The strongest attachment that each champion held to a person. There was an elaborate process with safeguards, so there would be no mistake and it would be fair to each champion. Severus, do you have anything to say to Draco?"

"For the record," Severus said, "This is foolishness, and I advised against it."

"Thank you for that, Severus," said Dumbledore, and began to wave his wand in a ripple through the air, murmuring something hypnotizing that sent Draco's senses fading, and finally falling into an enchanted sleep.

Naufragiam

Chapter Notes

Playlist

Draco resurfaced. Harry Potter's arms were around him, pulling him up past the surface of the lake, where as promised, he could breathe again. Afterwards, Harry disappeared, as if he'd been dragged underwater by some deadly creature. Draco couldn't breathe until Harry surfaced again, with... a very cute, petite little blonde child? Harry was gasping for breath, but he looked triumphant.

Well might he, as the pulsating roar around them was proven not just be the ringing and water in Draco's ears, but a crowd, from a distance. Draco remembered complaining about how poor this task was as a spectator sport. Now he had missed it entirely.

Harry was getting a standing ovation for doing the same thing he had before: ignoring the entire point of the task, trying to save all of the champions' loved ones- *loved ones.* The difference was that it hadn't been Ron's bright red head to be hauled up from under the water by Harry, whose hands finally finished turning from webbed to human fingers again. It was Draco, blinking lake water out of his eyes, treading water, and struggling to process everything. All he could think was that Harry Potter was doubly an idiot: once for saving someone else's hostage, and ignoring everything Draco had told him about competitiveness. And twice an idiot, for loving Draco Malfoy.

It was very cold. Draco turned to Harry and said the first thing he could think of. "Get me out of this bloody water, you dozing blunderbus! You haven't finished the rescue!"

Harry's face broke into a huge, helplessly fond grin, and he grabbed Draco by the arm. The touch felt like a permanent clamp on his limb, with the knowledge trying to force its way into Draco's head, inadmissible until he was alone. Or at least not in front of hundreds. "Come on, then, you great Horklump," said Harry, and Draco had to be the one to grab the little girl's hand.

"Don't forget the child, Harry. She might be Fleur Delacour's sister, but that doesn't *quite* mean she deserves to die," Draco drawled. The little girl stuck her tongue out at him. But she still seized on his arm and let him and Harry drag her to safety.

"Really, do you think you could keep it down a little?" Draco complained to the mermaids, who were singing a whole bloody Wagnerian opera around them. "Not very constructive, is it-" Then he told himself to shut his mouth, before he had to add *mermaids of the Great Lake* to the list of enemies he'd made this year.

"So the answer to the question," Harry panted, "Whether you *ever* stop running your mouth? It's a no, then, huh?"

The little girl eyed them dubiously once they'd swam up to the edge of the water, where the judges awaited them. "Just get it over with and kiss," the little girl said crossly, "Then give me a lift."

Draco grabbed her, horrified, and practically put out his back hauling himself and the little girl up onto the bank. Fleur Delacour came up shrieking and hysterical, throwing herself on her sister, though they were both frozen cold. "Gabrielle! Gabrielle! Is she alive? Is she 'urt?"

"She's fine," Potter said, rather faintly, as if his excessive heroics had taken more of a toll on him than he'd initially let show.

In the blue loop, Draco had witnessed this breakdown of Delacour over her sister and thought it pathetic. Now, he knew if it was Luna for him, he would have been even less composed. "She was giving me sass on the way over," Draco called to Delacour, "So I think she's fine."

"Merci," Delacour sobbed, "Merci, Draco, Harry, merci..."

Dumbledore helped Harry up, and Madam Pomfrey took him to the other champions and hostages. Draco's heart was lifted when he saw Hermione sitting there, wrapped in a blanket with a cup of something hot in her hands, wet and bedraggled but very much intact. "*Striker*!" Draco shrieked, and flung himself on her with as much hysteria as Delacour with her sister.

"Ssh, it's alright, Frankenstein, it's alright, Harry saved you," Hermione whispered in his ear, pulling him into the chair beside her. She got a blanket, wrapping it around his shivering frame, then called out for Madam Pomfrey to give him some of the hot potion as well. Pepper-Up Potion, he recognized, and inwardly thought Severus could have provided better. "Well done, Harry!" Hermione called, as Harry sank into the chair on the other side of Draco, wrapped up in thick wool.

"Don't say it, Draco," Harry said wearily, "I know you're going to kill me for this," and Draco's heart stuttered. "You're going to say I shouldn't have stayed to save Fleur's sister too..."

Compared to the part where Draco was *what Harry would most sorely miss in the world*, he found he didn't mind Harry being extra-heroic in the least. But he put on a menacing look and drawled, "Oh, yes, we're going to talk about your lack of killer instinct later..."

"You have a water-beetle in your hair, Hermione," said Krum, and Draco stared at it, wondering if it was Rita Skeeter, then flicked it none too gently away.

Hermione didn't even acknowledge the poor bastard, just kept fretting after Draco and Harry. She took a towel and began to rub both their wild heads of hair dry. "What's this Draco said? You saved Fleur's sister too? Is that why you're so late?"

Hermione began to demand details out of a progressively more sheepish Harry, while Dumbledore networked with the ugly merpeople. Draco could see from close up that they

were discussing the competition with him, giving input. It was doubly good, then, that Draco hadn't given them a piece of his mind for their infernal caterwauling.

"Hey, Krum," Draco called. "Good job saving Hermione, yeah? Good man." He elbowed Krum companionably, figuring the boy needed some kind of recognition. Merlin knew Hermione wasn't giving it to him. "Hey, have you seen Ron or Luna? Have they let them in? What about what *I* would most sorely miss?" He presumed the talon wand was somewhere safe, preferably with Severus.

Delacour was brought over, really looking like hell. She gushed over Harry, kissing him twice on each cheek. Draco saw Harry go beet red, and felt a twisting of ugly jealousy in his gut that had never been more inappropriate, when *he* had been Harry's hostage in the lake, and that had to mean-

"Draco," Delacour said, and then again to get his attention. "And you, too- you 'elped-"

"Eh, not really," said Draco, and she pressed hard kisses to each of his cheeks anyway.

"Hey, that's enough, let's go," Harry said, actually shooing her away, while Krum struggled to get Hermione's attention behind him. Harry turned to Draco, looking glad she hadn't tried to give him another kiss. What Draco now recognized as possessiveness was only too obvious.

Harry was jealous. He was always getting jealous over Draco, over and over, whether it was Draco's fake crush on Charlie Weasley, or Diggory or Theo or someone else. His jealous mind had even invented a potential infatuation of Draco's for *Severus*, before he knew Severus was Draco's godfather. How could Draco have missed this? Diggory was right. Draco really was the densest person at Hogwarts.

Just then, Ludo Bagman's voice began to speak with a heavy Sonorus charm, and the tent and crowd both fell silent. "Ladies and gentlemen, we have reached our decision. Merchieftainess Murcus has told us exactly what happened at the bottom of the lake, and we have therefore decided to award marks out of fifty for each of the champions, as follows...

"Miss Fleur Delacour, though she demonstrated excellent use of the Bubble-Head Charm, was attacked by Grindylows as she approached her goal, and failed to retrieve her hostage. We award her twenty-five points."

Twenty-five points was generous. Draco would have given her zero. In real life, there was no in-between. Either you saved someone or you didn't.

"I deserved zero," said Delacour, and looked like she meant it. Maybe she was smarter than he'd thought, at least in that.

"Mr. Cedric Diggory, who also used the Bubble-Head Charm, was first to return with his hostage, though he returned one minute outside the time limit of an hour."

That sure made all the Hufflepuffs happy. It shouldn't. Maybe Diggory wouldn't have done so well, and gotten a step closer to his possible doom, if Harry had listened to Draco and not kept helping him so much.

"We therefore award him forty-seven points.

"Mr. Viktor Krum used an incomplete form of Transfiguration, which was nevertheless effective, and was second to return with his hostage. We award him forty points."

Draco felt obliged to clap for Krum, since no one else in the tent but Karkaroff did, even Hermione. But that earned him a dirty look from Harry, and made his and Karkaroff's eyes meet uncomfortably as the only two applauding.

"Mr. Harry Potter used Gillyweed to great effect. He returned last, and well outside the time limit of an hour. However, the Merchieftainess informs us that Mr. Potter was first to reach the hostages, and that the delay in his return was due to his determination to return all hostages to safety, not merely his own."

Draco gave Harry a slow clap that conveyed his opinion of that decision. Harry raked a hand back through his wet hair, giddily guilty. Draco had never thought he could feel so cold and so hot at once.

"Most of the judges-" Bagman's look at Karkaroff made no secret of the dissenter- "Feel that this shows moral fiber and merits full marks. However... Mr. Potter's score is forty-five points."

Draco clapped more genuinely. Harry beamed at him and Hermione, while Krum looked taken aback by how wholeheartedly Hermione was cheering for someone else getting a better score than him, the boy who would miss her more than anything in the world.

"The third and final task will take place at dusk on the twenty-fourth of June," Bagman said, to give Draco just one more damn thing to panic about. It was the only thing that should properly be on his mind. "The champions will be notified of what is coming, precisely one month beforehand." Or Draco could just notify Harry the next time they were in private, if he could come up with a good excuse for knowing. "Thank you all for your support of the champions."

They were all marched en masse to the hospital wing, where they could be further administered warming potions and observed for signs of frostbite. Eventually, Ron and Luna managed to force their way in, and made much of Harry for his dumb show of excessive heroism. Though objectively it *was* rather impressive he had made it there first, before three seventh-years, *and* been able to rescue two people at once...

Stop looking at him, stop wanting him, you're not a human, you're a monster, you're a dragon, and when the dragon loves the stag...

As I don't already love him-

Love as a more physical *verb, then. Because if it meant just the emotional sense, well, that wouldn't be a prophecy of the future, it would be a bloody recap of my life.*

"Draco?" Luna said, coming over and beginning to finger-comb his messy nest of wispy hair. "You're being so quiet. Are you very cold still?"

Draco was, as a matter of fact, but he never wanted to worry Luna. "Give me a hug, then, you sad unaffectionate excuse for a cousin- ah, here we go, that's better..."

Draco indulged himself in a good restorative cuddle with Luna, but was uncomfortably aware of more than one set of eyes on him. One was Diggory's, looking over the shoulder of Chang in the throes of his own cuddle session. There was something of an *I-told-you-so* in his gaze that Draco had no intention of ever giving him the opportunity to deliver. The day he willingly suffered Diggory's gloating would be the day he formally relinquished the title of Severus Snape's godson.

The other eyes, of course, were Harry's, big and green and magnetic from across the room. Luna felt like something steadying, then, that Draco had to hold onto tighter, with the thing that was buzzing and fizzing right underneath the uppermost layer of his skin. He had to steel himself to keep from letting it out, open his mouth and force himself to consciously breathe normally. Harry smiled at him, half-sheepish and half-hopeful. Draco was grateful that Harry's idiocy, with saving Gabrielle Delacour, had given Draco an excuse to act mad and keep his distance. Which was very ungrateful, after Harry had saved him too. But he wouldn't have been there in the first place, if Harry hadn't been dumb enough to feel-

Draco could essentially see the *future.* But he hadn't seen this coming. Maybe because it was a change, like when Lockhart didn't Obliviate himself, when Lupin wasn't revealed as a werewolf, like when all those cauldrons of Longbottom's didn't melt. Alter the blue loop, and Draco's ability to predict the red line would grow progressively less potent. And here was an alteration, not in Draco but in Harry, that could-

He buried his face in Luna's shoulder, to indicate he was absolutely not to be disturbed, and tried to come up with a narrative in his head where this Second Task didn't mean Harry was in love with him. He kept coming up empty.

Eventually, Madam Pomfrey shooed them out, telling them they'd be better off in their own beds, getting warm and getting some much-needed rest there. It was advice that the Gryffindors, at least, completely ignored, Ron already talking excitedly of a party his siblings were preparing in the common room. Hermione didn't say anything to argue about sticking to the rules, for once. She just looked so very relieved, and eager to celebrate that relief with her friends. Luna said she wanted to come, and was summarily dragged along. But Harry lingered in the corridor, and made a strange noise when Draco turned to go the opposite way from Gryffindor Tower.

"Draco, you were in the lake, don't you want to come too-" Harry began, and then cut himself off, pushing back his messy hair with a self-deprecating laugh. "Wait, how many times do you have to remind me, you're banned from our common room, aren't you? You don't think an exception could be made just this once?"

Draco squinted. "Not if there's a klaxon set to go off like for boys in the girls' dorms."

"Okay, well, um..." Harry began, while Draco stared plaintively after where their friends were heading out, albeit slowly so Harry could see them and catch up. "I'm, er, really sorry you had to get caught up in all this... though you helped me the most with the clue, so I guess really it was kind of like, um, a joint task, for you know, both of us, and, er..."

Don't lead him on. Diggory had said that over and over. But Draco had also seen the look in Krum's eyes after he saved Hermione and she ignored him, without any real thanks. Draco could give Harry a hug goodbye, at least, after snuggling Luna for about fifteen minutes straight in front of him. That set the tone for a friendly hug, just friendly.

He told himself that as he stepped forward and wrapped his arms around Harry. His hands linked around Harry's neck, fingers brushing through that too-long bit of soft hair at the base of it. He meant to pull back right away, just leave the impression of his arms there on Harry's shoulders and leave it. But Harry's hands went around his middle, and pulled him completely into his arms.

They hadn't hugged like this since second year, when they'd found out Hermione had been petrified. Their bodies had gotten older since then. And neither of them was crying now.

"Draco," Harry groaned, and buried his face in the messy knots of hair below Draco's ear, nuzzling there blindly. *I wonder if he likes the smell of me, if I'd be what he smells in Amortentia*, Draco thought, and felt a wave of need so unmistakable it shook him. Harry's arms were steady around him, not something Draco could panic within even if he wanted to. Harry's chest was against Draco's, his fuzzy Weasley jumper doing little to hide the lean athletic feel of his body. And his lips were hot against Draco's cold throat, rubbing at his hair affectionately and then at the skin beneath, grazing over the edge of Draco's chin before inhaling the scent of Draco's hair again-

"Harry, are you coming?" called Luna.

Harry smiled at Draco a last time before running off to his friends.

Draco waited until they were all gone before he sank against the nearest wall, pressing his face against it. Even the wall felt warmer than his face. Harry's warmth had been too fleeting to make any real dent, in the feeling all his skin had turned to ice. Incendio glacius. The lake and what it meant had frozen out all the dragonfire.

Draco's feet took him towards the dungeons with the intention of going to find Severus. Whether to try and wheedle more help, with his body's cold sluggish response to the water, or to take him to task, for having gotten his assessment of Harry so spectacularly wrong, he couldn't say. He wanted both, honestly, but the negligible number of steps more from his dorm to Severus's chambers seemed impossible, once he was at the crossroads. Let alone that Severus almost definitely wouldn't let Draco stay overnight, and so soon, he'd have to drag himself back to here-

The Wolfsbane. The thought hit Draco out of nowhere as he let himself into the Slytherin dungeons. The Wolfsbane, he should have gone to check on it, and Hermione was off partying. He tried to work up the will to climb so many flights of stairs to Myrtle's bathroom, when it was all he could do tell himself he could make it one flight of stairs to his dorm. And then he saw Theo coming forward, though all of the Slytherins around him were eyeing him with even more skepticism than usual. That was what being publicly displayed as Harry Potter's loved one did to your reputation in Slytherin.

"Theo," Draco hissed, "Walk with me, will you?" Theo followed him to their dorm, and had to help him up the last step. "Sorry," Draco muttered, "I'm just really tired. Theo, I know I'm a prick, always asking you to send messages for me like some human owl, I know that, but there's one right now that's really, really important. Do you think you could take one last one to the entrance of Gryffindor Tower? I'm too tired to make it, honestly."

"Is the message for Potter?" Theo asked, crossing his arms, and Draco gave a weary look around and realized all the other boys were there, watching them judgmentally.

"No," Draco said, rolling his eyes, and went to his bed to get paper. "Here, one second. It's for Hermione Granger, okay? Please knock on the door, and tell whoever comes to take it to her right away, that she'll be angry and tell them off if they don't. Please, Theo."

"Alright," said Theo with a sigh, "Write your note."

Draco was glad he hadn't had to progress to the threatening-to-curse-you phase of negotiation for this favor. He wasn't sure if he had the energy to actually follow through enough to curse a gerbil.

Striker,

Our infant child is past due. Tend to its cries before the due date expires tonight. I am too weak to go to it. I will accept any remonstration you like for this laziness tomorrow.

-Frankenstein

Theo read the note in front of him, as Draco had known he would do. "What is this?" he said, all the vagueness and nicknames stumping him.

"Just take it, Theo," Draco whined, and stomped into his bed, Muffliato, Spelunca secure, and then he fell backwards. He managed to take nothing but his shoes off before he fell asleep.

Draco had no idea how to proceed with Harry, or honestly with anyone, after he had been the one chosen as Harry's most beloved for everyone to see. The way Ron had been completely unresentful, Ron who was the most jealous person Draco had ever met beside himself, was as telling as anything else. If Ron thought it was just strength of *friendship*, he would have been bitter, but two of the other three were the boys' bloody Yule Ball dates, not their friends. Delacour just didn't like Roger Davies enough- and Harry *had* asked Draco first- Ron had kept insinuating Draco fancied Harry, that was really why Draco'd had to challenge him to that duel- and why hadn't Draco realized? How could Pansy bloody Parkinson have been this right, when she cursed him with Conjunctivo and told him he was *just blind*?

Draco didn't have to face anyone but his dormmates, as it turned out he came down with a nasty flu after his long submersion in the water. He would have been grateful for the chance

to regroup and plan socially, if the sickness hadn't been so violent and unpleasant. By Blaise's gleeful report, Draco learned that he was the only one, out of all the champions and hostages, who'd gotten sick from their exposure. "Well, the little girl went back to France, didn't she, we wouldn't know," Draco said weakly, and Theo laughed gently.

"She probably didn't get sick either. You and your delicate Malfoy constitution."

According to Theo, Severus was on a rampage such as had never been seen before in the days of Hogwarts, snarling at his students in class for the temerity to so much as breathe. He had been seen several times at tables and in corridors openly berating *Dumbledore*, even, for forcing Draco to take part, hissing that he had protested against it from the first and look what had happened. In a more private communication, though, Severus sent Draco a letter folded around one extra-strength, personally brewed dose of Pepper-Up Potion, and wrote that he suspected Draco had suffered more adversely than others because his immune system had already been weakened. By magical exhaustion, he said, not that Draco hadn't been able to suspect that by Severus's inclusion of Vitamix potion, Invigoration draught, and seven large bottles of double-strength angel's infusion. Severus's instructions said to soak in the infusions daily, in a small tub in the Slytherin dorms, and that he must not miss any for an entire week. Nor would Severus allow Draco to return to class for that following week under any circumstances. *The Slytherin dungeons may be set on fire,* he had ended his note, *And I would still not permit you to leave your dorm.*

Theo enlisted Vince and Greg to help with all the message-carrying. Draco didn't leave the Slytherin dorm for a week, until he was so stir-crazy he might have been ready to set the dungeons alight himself, but for Severus's warning. The issue was not seeing his non-Slytherin friends at all, especially not seeing Hermione, which left Draco feeling lifeless and unlikable, nothing to lift his spirits. Greg even carried him meals, so there was no excuse for Dobby to pop in. The complete lack of a visit from Dobby made Draco fear Severus had expressly forbidden it.

So there was little to do most of the time but think of Harry.

Merlin, he could not have hated himself more. His schoolboy infatuation had been one thing when he'd thought reciprocation impossible. Now that he had the thought it was returned, that if he wanted Harry, he could *have* Harry, his mind felt ruined, invaded by so many thoughts and images he'd tried to keep from himself. All the things he would do if he had Harry as his own.

Draco was not to leave his dorm for a week, his travels only between bed and the bathroom. In that time, lying down staring blankly at the green canopy above him, he had more time than he could stand to think. His mind must not be working very well, though, as he had calculated he would be getting out on March 1st, Ron's birthday exactly, and wouldn't miss it. But at some point, when he heard Vince and Greg arguing about whether it was a leap year, he remembered February didn't have 31 days, it had 28. He wouldn't be out until the 4th, because Vince was right, it happened not to be a leap year.

Great. The first time he and Ron had actually been friends on one of his birthdays, and Draco still couldn't be there to celebrate it with him.

He did try to think, though his sneezing and coughing and infernal headaches gave him only brief respites, for thinking about anything other than how miserable he was. Except he thought that when he wasn't in pain too. Draco had two major questions to answer, life and death questions: how to prevent the return of the Dark Lord, and what to do about Harry's feelings for him. The second had become a life or death situation once Draco heard Trelawney's prophecy.

The return of the Dark Lord actually proved easier to sort. Draco had his spell ready to disable the Portkey, though it would be possibly touch-and-go being sure he saw the cup last. But at least he was relatively sure who'd be behind the cup being one, Crouch and/or Karkaroff. And then there was his vial of Felix Felicis, small enough that he decided to drink every drop of it on the morning of June 24th. Hopefully, that would make him lucky enough for his timing to work, and the Portkey plot to fail. Any future plots of the Dark Lord's, well, it wouldn't be on Draco anymore to stop them.

He did have Theo, at least, who was proving far more useful than he ever had in the blue loop, although not in his role discovering the secrets of the talon wand. Draco had a lot of free time to spend lolling about in bed feeling sorry for himself, which meant a lot of time to bellow for Theo to come read to him. They hadn't heard back yet from Charlie, but there was the dark magic tomes to look through. And they happened by chance upon a page, listed after Cadaunuptium in *Moste Dark Blood Rituals of the Demon Goddess Hecate*, whose name caught Draco's attention: Naufragiam.

"Don't you want to hear about Cadaunuptium first?" Theo teased gently. "It's precisely what it sounds like, from the..." He wrinkled his nose. "*Illustrations*."

"Naufragiam," Draco said, with some dim intimation that the Latin roots were echoing something he had heard once, something fatally important. He settled back against his emerald sheets with a yowling, dubious sort of yawn. Theo obligingly returned to the passage, soft sandy hair falling in his eyes. He brushed it aside and set to reading in that level tenor, as he spoke words that made Draco's heart pound faster than any words ever had from those pretty Slytherin lips.

"'The Naufragiam ritual'," Theo read, "'Also known as the Shipwreck Scourge, shall force the shipwrecked to remain in the place where the ritual binds him, for two sunsets. Wards of demonic force shall hold the shipwrecked linked to the soil of the ground, and nothing shall force him from this dirt, nor shall any escape be nigh. Not by flight of foot, flight in air, carried by another, not by any magicks in the earth and sky and pit shall the shipwrecked rise from his homeland...' Sounds useful for slavery, doesn't it? That might be kind of thing that would interest your aunt..."

Draco's mouth had gone dry. He had to lick his lips several times to wet it enough to speak, and Theo's sideways glance at him was just white noise with the thrumming in his veins of possibility. "It's temporary, though, right? Two sunsets. So I don't know how useful..."

"It says for the simple shipwreck- yes, two sunsets," Theo explained, surveying the page with those ever-sharp blue eyes, "That the victim ingests the potion. With or without his knowledge, you'd think. But there's another part to the ritual to bind them longer. Let's see... the administration of even a drop of Naufragiam, whatever the initial quantity taken, on the

skin of one who had ever taken the same batch- along with the curse Dominexcorio- compels him to return to that... they call it homeland. If a full lunar cycle passes without that return, the skin touched begins to wither, and eventually all of the victim's skin falls off his bones." Theo shot Draco a more thoughtful sideways stare. "This *is* dark."

"It's *perfect*," Draco breathed, and Theo's eyes narrowed so much that he was forced to quickly add, "For slavery, yeah, the extended ritual... funny they don't administer that to prisoners in Azkaban..."

"Look at the potion for it, though," Theo said dryly, handing over the book. Its formidable weight barely registered, with the restless buzzing come alive under Draco's skin. "Time-consuming, rare and esoteric ingredients- expensive- and it's for an individual only. Easier to just rely on wards. And Dementors, of course..."

Draco tuned Theo out, staring frantically at the page. Three months total to make, with one month brewing, then a blood ritual, and two months of brewing after that. The ingredients were ones he could theoretically get, as a Malfoy.

"Seeking slaves does seem to be a natural progression for you," Theo quipped, and Draco grabbed Theo, kissed him hard enough on the cheek that the sound echoed throughout the dorm, and then shoved him straight out of his bed and closed the curtains between them.

NAUFRAGIAM

I. VESSEL OF THE BLOOD

-Add three Pomegranate seeds.

-Submerge the seeds in Tincture of Demiguise. Wait for three days precisely.

- Stir slowly, then add three more Pomegranate seeds.

-Add nine parts Octopus powder. Stir vigorously, then heat the mixture.

-Chop the dried leaves of Nightshade and of Niffler's Fancy, and combine. Add mixture to cauldron.

-Add one Witch's Ganglion.

-Add one part of Acromantula venom and stir vigorously.

-Boil at low heat for one month.

II. LETTING OF THE BLOOD

-Take the mixture from heat and let it cool completely.

-Engrave the Wheel of Hecate in the ground of the new homeland of the shipwrecked.

-Pour all the cooled mixture in the shape of the snakes.

-Lay a possession of the victim in the center of the wheel.

-Exactly at midnight, pour the blood of the shipwrecked onto the center of the wheel.

-Recite the incantation Naufraga Captivare three times. Wait for the conflagration to die.

III. FIXATION OF THE BLOOD

-Return to the ashes to a new cauldron.

-Crush to powder the wings of three Death's Head hawk moths, and add to the ashes.

-Fill the cauldron halfway with pulverized black quicksilver.

-Fill the remainder of the cauldron to the brim with the water of the homeland.

-Add three more Pomegranate seeds.

-Boil at low heat for two months.

-Remove from heat and cool potion completely.

-Inspect the potion for color. A successful Naufragiam potion will turn to dark blue once cooled, but turn wine red when the incantation Naufraga Captivare is recited.

-Recite the incantation Naufraga Captivare three times to finish the potion.

And then there was the Dominexcorio part, but Draco didn't need that. He didn't even need two sunsets. Just one. Though two to be safe would do nicely.

Yes, as a whole, that looked totally doable. Not at *all* something Draco would mess up.

Hermione had passed the news through Theo that their "infant child" had survived, and she was taking care of it in Draco's absence. That meant no Myrtle's bathroom for Naufragiam. He later learned that the only hitch to the Wolfsbane was a now-informed Luna's attempts to try and help.

Together, that meant he was now going to be in regular Potions classes, weekly extra Potions lessons, illegally brewing Wolfsbane with Hermione, and making Naufragiam in dead secret to boot. It would work until the next full lunar cycle passed from when it was made, so Draco had no worries about finishing it too early, only too late.

He got Theo to carry off and send letters inquiring after ingredients before he was even done his bed rest. And of course he could rob the Malfoy stores again, though he might not be lucky enough to pass by unobserved this time.

It was lucky this was only his back-up plan. He was looking forward to trying this, as if he needed more hobbies to take up his spare time. All he could say was thank Merlin there was no Quidditch this year.

And Naufragiam seemed downright simple, compared to the question of Harry Potter.

If there hadn't been that damned prophecy, Draco might well have said damn the blue loop, damn what either of them deserved, damn fate, damn the time bomb of Draco's wand, damn everyone in the world but them, and thrown himself at Harry's feet, whatever the consequences. His body was making very insistently known, especially in his dreams, that it was in favor of that option. But when he remembered the prophecy, he couldn't trick his mind into sanctioning it.

Even if he hadn't heard the prophecy, though, Periander's warning about not using his wand anymore should have sufficed to mark him as too dangerous to be that close to someone that irreplaceable. He should have known it even without Periander, the dark magic he had done already, all the strangeness and power of his wand, the strangeness of his arrival in the red line to begin with, the blue loop's warning that Ginny Weasley was who Harry Potter would *truly* choose without any lies in his way... all of it should have sufficed already.

It wasn't that he wasn't good enough for Harry, though that was certainly true. It was that he was too dangerous for him. *When the dragon loves the stag, the stag will bleed.*

So he *could* have Harry Potter. And yet he couldn't.

He just had to wait a little longer for his body to catch up with that conclusion.

The first time he saw Harry again after his exile in the dungeons, he wanted to fling himself to his knees and tell Harry absolutely everything his tongue would allow him. He wanted to tell Harry he loved him and would kill for him. But this wasn't a fairytale. Draco was not about to be so naive as to let himself think it one. He was stronger than that. He was Severus Snape's godson.

It was a comfort that Draco's first day back included Potions. Or it would have been, if Severus hadn't seemed to take it on doubly as his life's mission to ensure Harry was miserable.

There was no inflammatory article from Rita Skeeter out about the Second Task this time, only a rather respectful and informative catalog of the factual events. No painting of Hermione as a scarlet woman. Maybe Draco's threats had been more useful than Severus had given credit for. He was very glad in retrospect he'd made them. He hadn't been looking forward to any strident articles bewailing Harry Potter getting seduced to the dark side by a Malfoy. But Severus's resources were infinite. Rather than tormenting Harry with a

newspaper article like Draco remembered, he directed him away from Ron to a cauldron right in front of his desk, close enough for no one but Harry to hear the poison Severus poured down upon him. This might be even worse, to judge by the stilted way Harry was trying to make his potion, face red and shoulders slumped over his cauldron.

Hermione did almost all the work on the potion that day, with Draco watching anxiously as his godfather seemed to torment Harry. Whatever Severus was saying seemed well-chosen, with Harry as his captive audience seeming to radiate out more and more misery as the class went on. Draco didn't know if Severus had done this before, or if this was for the special occasion of Draco returning to class. He made himself not intervene, at least until Harry's attention seemed to slip, and he picked up several ginger roots without slicing them first, with the clear intention to just toss them in and have done with it. That meant boom, explosion-

"Potter!" Draco barked, abandoning Hermione entirely and going to the front of the class. "It looks like you require a partner in order not to imperil the entire class, even our honored professor!" Draco snatched the roots from his hand and began to pointedly slice them. Draco had done such a pitch-perfect impression of Severus, it seemed Severus was at a loss for how to tell him off or dislodge him from Harry's side. He just glowered at them before going off to menace Neville.

When Draco glanced back at Hermione, she just gave him a little thumbs-up. She would be fine on her own.

"Thank you," Harry whispered, though his demeanor remained drooping. He only seemed to pick up his head and become alert again someone started knocking on the door.

"Enter," said Severus, and Karkaroff of all people came waltzing in. Severus crossed back over the room to stand over Draco protectively.

"We need to talk," Karkaroff whispered. Draco could see Harry trying to eavesdrop almost as intently as Harry was.

"I'll talk to you after my lesson, Karkaroff-" Severus muttered, and Karkaroff had the unmitigated gall to *interrupt* Severus. In his own bloody classroom. This man was giving death wish a new meaning. Draco abandoned prudence and stared up at Karkaroff as hatefully as he liked.

"I want to talk now, while you can't slip off, Severus. You've been avoiding me."

And who would ever want to ignore an individual as singularly pleasant as Igor Karkaroff?

"After the lesson," Severus snapped, and if they hadn't been in a lesson, Draco gave it even odds that Severus would have already cursed Karkaroff.

Karkaroff had the gall to stay, as if performing some inter-school class observation in his capacity as Durmstrang Headmaster. In his place, Draco would have pretended that, but no, Karkaroff practically had to put a flashing neon sign above his head that said he was here on Very Important Death Eater Business. It certainly piqued Harry's interest, as he knocked over his bottle of armadillo bile just before the end of class, and kept him as well as Draco down

behind their cauldron cleaning as the others left. When Ron and Hermione stopped by them, Draco waved them on. The last thing he wanted was either of them to get caught in the potential crossfire.

"What's so urgent?" Severus hissed at Karkaroff.

"This," said Karkaroff, and Harry peered around the edge of the cauldron.

"What's he showing him?" Draco hissed.

"His forearm," Harry whispered back. "What does that mean?"

"No idea," Draco lied, though it obviously had to be the Dark Mark.

"Well?" Karkaroff demanded, even more rudely demanding without thinking he had an audience. "Do you see? It's never been this clear, never since-"

"Put it away!" Severus snarled. Draco didn't think Harry had seen the Mark from his angle.

"But you must have noticed-" Karkaroff started.

"We can talk later, Karkaroff!" Severus snapped, then did a double-take at where Harry, of course, had made his spying head too obvious. "Potter! What are you doing?"

"We're just cleaning up his armadillo bile, sir," Draco said, poking his head up from behind to forestall Severus's rage. Harry held up the wet rag as proof, but Karkaroff for once didn't even spare Harry a second look. He only had eyes for Draco. Mute horror filled his face, and he made a break for it at once. Draco started after him, only for Severus to catch him at the door.

"Where," Severus intoned, "Does my burdensome godson think he might be going?"

"I have to wash the bile off my hands, of course," Draco said innocently.

Harry had to ruin it, of course, by being so damn straightforward. "What was Karkaroff showing you, Professor?"

Severus's eyes went distant and fearful. "And here I thought I had adequately impressed upon you already today, *Potter,* how *unwanted* and *unprepared* you are, to deal personally with *any* occupants of these dungeons. 30 points from Gryffindor, and get out of my sight!"

Severus didn't hold Draco back from racing out with Harry, or at least Draco sprinted out too fast for him to stop him. "Come on," Harry said, and grabbed his sleeve after they finished washing their hands. "We have to go tell the others! Maybe Hermione will know what it meant!"

"You go," Draco said with a sigh. "I have to send an owl to Uncle Sirius."

Draco had chosen his excuse well to get Harry off his back. Harry just looked pleased Draco was in contact with his beloved godfather, and smiled at him before running out. Draco didn't

even feel guilty for lying as he reached into his pocket and activated the Marauder's Map. It was not hard to find Karkaroff on the map, and follow him.

Karkaroff was heading outside, in the direction of the Great Lake. Draco immediately rushed in that direction, wishing he'd been able somehow to wheedle the invisibility cloak off Harry too. The dot went into the lake before Draco reached it, which meant he must be going onto the Durmstrang ship. Draco caught sight of a gangway lowered to the bank, and Karkaroff striding across it in the distance. He waited until he saw Karkaroff reach the deck of the ship, and the gangway start to go up again, before casting his strongest Ventus duo in its direction to keep it from fully closing. It kept trying to go up, so when Draco reached it, he cast a Carpe retractum and secured the rope around a tree stump before following Karkaroff down the gangway. Karkaroff was nowhere in sight on the decks, so he must have gone inside, missing Draco's entrance. Draco unlocked the top doors and began to search the boat, casting Homenum revelio before he entered each room. He found himself angry enough that the fury in him was overshadowing any fear. He knew this could end in a duel, and almost hoped for it.

But he prevented one neatly when his spell detected a man behind one of the doors. He flung the door open and cast Expelliarmus before a preoccupied Karkaroff could react. Karkaroff's wand flew to Draco's hand, zooming past a room full of maps. "Look, Igor," Draco drawled, "*Your* wand doesn't burn *my* hand."

"Malfoy," Karkaroff spat, eyes darkening with pure hatred. "Never know to leave well enough alone, do you? First you set your godfather on me... then you go sniffing around my champion and forcing your ugly Mudblood on him-"

"Langlock!" Draco cast without thinking, the spike of fire in him at the sound of that word too much for him to bear. Karkaroff had the same reaction most everyone did to that curse, reaching up and groping panicked at his throat and then mouth, at last feeling at his tongue. He tried to physically un-stick it, pulling it, then threw off his gloves, exposing the brand on his palm. It was as dark as the day it had been imprinted there.

Karkaroff followed the direction of Draco's gaze, and looked as angry as Draco felt. But no sound would come out of his mouth other than incoherent grunts no matter how hard he tried, which rather suited the man's level of intelligence. "You see," Draco said, "If a tongue speaks ill of me or my friends, that tongue stops *functioning*. Call her Mudblood again, and you'll not just lose a working tongue, you'll lose a *mouth.* And I won't reverse *that* curse. Finite incantatem!"

Karkaroff waved his tongue about rather repulsively in the air, restoring feeling to it, then turned it on Draco with no self-preservation. "You dare raise your wand against your better? You will pay for this, Malfoy- when the time comes, you will pay most dearly-"

You mean when the Dark Lord rises again? Draco wanted to ask, but he couldn't give away his knowledge. Either Karkaroff was working with Crouch, or else Karkaroff had no idea, and letting him know might make him run for the hills. So he just played up the dark wizard in him, tossing Karkaroff's wand up and down in the air while keeping the talon wand pointed right at him. "I would find it prudent at this juncture to remind you, for *your* sake, that the Dark Mark isn't the only *mark* you carry. You also bear the talon brand."

He stared pointedly at the brand on Karkaroff's hand. "It's got some things in common with the Dark Mark, you know, my personal brand. Except it isn't meant for friends, but for enemies. You are *going* to stay away from my friends and my godfather. Defy my will, and you will see what I can inflict on those who wear the talon brand and yet dare disobey the owner of the talon wand- it is only by *my* clemency, you weak fool, that you even still *have* a left hand to carry that mark upon-"

"Expelliarmus!"

Severus stood behind Draco at the entrance to the map room, with Karkaroff's wand in his hand, and Draco's levitated in midair outside Severus's reach. Damn. That might have undermined the gravitas of Draco's villainous monologue somewhat. "*Mr.* Malfoy," Severus said with exquisite venom. "I will speak with you later. Now *leave this ship*." Draco opened his mouth to protest. "Go!"

Draco looked at his wand. Severus cast a soft Flipendo that hurled it through the air to Draco none too nicely, before shoving Draco out the door and slamming it in his face.

Too late, though, Severus. Draco pulled the talon wand to his lips and gave it a kiss in thanks. He trusted his message to Karkaroff had gone through clearly enough.

Protego Diabolica

Chapter Notes

Playlist

Draco made his way off the Durmstrang ship with reluctance, and stopped short when he saw he had left the gangway tied down. Severus could have gotten on the ship anyway, surely, but Draco had made it especially easy for him.

Draco was new to this whole supervillain business, alright?

He went to the library and feigned ignorance with his friends, but he had no such recourse with Severus. He received his godfather's summons right after dinner, and tromped over to Severus's chambers with a feeling of impending doom. Severus's rage did not disappoint him. Draco reminded himself he was lucky to be able to see Severus raging at all, that Severus had once been buried too far underground for that magnificent rage to ever be loosed again. It didn't make it sting any less for his godfather to call him foolish.

"Reckless, vain boy!" Severus raged. "The *talon brand*? What is this sick invention of yours? You called it *like the Dark Mark*? You have no conception of the gravity of such lies. You make up powers for yourself like a schoolchild playing pretend, with no preparation for the fact that in time, you might be called upon to produce them! *Never* speak of this invention again, never! I have been too encouraging, too forgiving. I have given you the freedom of the school, covered your every mistake, medicated your overuse of magic. Enabled you at every step! And I am repaid *thus*?"

"I had to make him fear me!" Draco protested. "So he would stay away from you-"

"Karkaroff's presence or absence," Severus growled, "Will not change *this*," and rolled up his left sleeve and showed Draco his Dark Mark. "You know what this is, child?"

"Of course," Draco said. He'd used to wear one. "I've seen Father's. But his is lighter."

"It will be no longer," Severus said grimly. "Karkaroff is panicked because the Marks are darkening. It marks the strength of the Dark Lord growing. And Karkaroff turned traitor and handed Death Eaters over to the Ministry. He has drawn the mantle of Durmstrang headmaster and their facade of dark magic around himself like a poor invisibility cloak, but he fears for his own hide regardless, should the Dark Lord return. He wants nothing more of me than to vent his fears-"

"You don't know that!" Draco protested. "I think he's plotting something! I think he was the one to put Harry's name in the Goblet of Fire- I think he's trying to kill him, and he might

have help-" But Draco couldn't mention Crouch. "Or maybe he wants help- he might want *you* to do it-"

"Stay away from Karkaroff, Draco. I know the man and his measure. I will handle him. You need to stay as far away as possible from men with marks like this." He gestured to his own arm, then rolled down his sleeve with icy precision.

"Except you, sir?" Draco asked in a small voice, and Severus rolled his eyes and nodded.

"You have been spoiled *rotten*. Tomorrow morning, you will bring me the permission I gave you to go flying at nights, and I will destroy it." Draco opened his mouth to protest. "Let that be a lesson to you. And it will help you stay clear of Krum. I expect you from here on out to be as little involved in *anything* related to Karkaroff and Durmstrang as possible."

"Including the Triwizard Tournament?"

"*Especially* the Triwizard Tournament. Do you think Karkaroff will relish seeing you rushing about trying to help your beloved Potter, you with your new false Dark Mark-"

"I won't be, though. I told Harry I wouldn't help him with the Third Task at all." Severus tilted his head quizzically. "I figured out some things about the Second Task, and told him. But I told him if he shared it with Diggory, then I wouldn't help him next time-"

"He did *what*?" Severus breathed, looking as dumbfounded as any sane person should rightly be. "What madness is this, to assist a *competitor*? No one is in danger of *death.* And here I thought saving Delacour's sister was his crowning jewel of ineptitude in this tournament. You see, Draco, the utter uselessness of the boy?"

"It doesn't matter," Draco said with a sigh. "I promise I'll stay away from the tournament, and from Karkaroff."

Dear Dragon-Face,

My brand from your wand has not faded in the slightest. Nor does it hurt or have any adverse effects, but then again, I haven't done anything since then against my terrifying cousin or his terrifying wand. Remus says the brand is ugly, but that he's gotten used to it. Still, any information on how to make it fade or disappear would be greatly appreciated. Not that I don't like a reminder on me of my darling nephew, but if we could get the one off my palm, I could get a tattoo for you or something. Not that Remus, reading over my shoulder, seems to approve. I have offered to get a tattoo of his name, or at least his initials on me, as well, and he does not seem thrilled with this prospect either. Honestly, sometimes Moony can be such a stick-in-the-mud!

Not that he doesn't like the tattoos I have. He just won't admit it.

I know you complain I never give you any information back, but there's really not much news to share on our part. The only interesting things going on are with me and Remus, and he

says I already overshare with you about that. But I'm trying to provide a positive queer role model for an impressionable youth! He never seems convinced by that either. Sourpuss. He's lucky he's cute.

Seriously, though, nephew, my important message of this letter is, stop branding people with your wand, as much as you can. And I hate to concur with your godfather here, but by Merlin, you had better stop telling people it's like the Dark Mark, or your doting uncle will be forced to imperil himself by returning to Hogwarts to beat some sense into you.

Sincerely,
Your Grim-Faced Uncle

Draco was going to be a better godson, he resolved, and a better nephew. That didn't keep him from continuing on the Wolfsbane with Hermione. And it didn't keep him from going to the storeroom and taking nightshade, octopus powder, tincture of Demiguise, and pomegranate seeds. The other ingredients were too rare or expensive to take from Severus. They were enough for now, though, to set up in the Room of Requirement, for the first step for Naufragiam.

That was, he intended to use the Room of Requirement to make Naufragiam. But it terrified him. The potion-making space he called up was different from the small sleek dueling one, and looked far too much like the room had with the Fiendfyre for Draco to stay there for long. He was stumped for a place to hide the brew, until he remembered he would have to conduct a ritual on the earth of the land, and working from the grounds already would make that easier. It saved him the trouble of carting over the cauldron too far on the day of the ritual. He snuck outside the castle that night using the Marauder's Map, used the secret passage through the Whomping Willow to the Shrieking Shack, and cleaned the space magically as best as he could, before setting the cauldron there. The first step was easy. He was just glad he'd taken enough tincture of Demiguise to fully submerge the pomegranate seeds. Now he waited three days.

The news they had to give up flying at night meant Klum was very glum, but at least it gave Draco more time to work on all his illegal potions. Several days after Draco told him, Krum came up and said, "I have asked Karkaroff for permission for us to go flying together at nights. But he vas very unhappy, and said many things about you. I do not think Karkaroff likes you very much."

Next Krum would be telling him the sky was blue and Hogwarts had four houses.

Before then, though, there was Hogsmeade on the sixth, making it vitally important that Draco had gotten out of his sickbed when he did. Once again, he had to beg off his non-date with Harry in the name of stealing supplies for the 'Wolfsbane', and Harry accepted it to help Sirius and Remus, though he looked let down. Draco would have come up with some other excuse to cancel, though, even if he didn't have to get the ingredients for Naufragiam. He was well aware that he couldn't carry on with his plan of ignoring Harry's feelings, feigning continued ignorance, and avoiding being alone with Harry until the end of time. But he'd

cross that bridge when he came to it. For now, illegal Apparition to rob his own parents. Normalcy.

Except when Draco had Apparated into the Malfoy storeroom and filled his bag with all the Acromantula venom, black quicksilver, Niffler's fancy, and pickling solution he could carry, then cast a Featherlight charm on it and stuffed in more, he found the bag pulled out of his hands, along with his wand from his pocket. He knew he'd been forgetting something, not getting Harry to give him the invisibility cloak this time.

For the second time in two days, someone had gotten the jump on him with an Expelliarmus. And Draco recognized the voice that had said it. Not his favorite person to be stuck with in these cellars without a wand.

"Did you notice the dragon decal was missing?" Draco asked weakly, turning to face his father. Of course he had, the thing was on Draco's bloody door. He didn't know why he hadn't thought of that before it was too late. "And the pictures?"

"And took precautions," Father said coldly, "Against my own son robbing me. Now let me see what it is you have risked illegal Apparition to gather." He ignored the wand at his feet for now, picking up Draco's sack and beginning to look at the ingredients. "Acromantula venom. Very expensive. Black quicksilver, Niffler's fancy, expensive, expensive... either you're brewing some very dangerous potion, or you're stealing to augment Severus's stores. With that paltry Hogwarts income-"

"Don't you dare say anything about my godfather-"

"You should have brought your pet Mudblood, you're terrible at plans on your own-"

"Don't you dare call her that!"

"But see, Draco," Father said with manic-eyed satisfaction, "*I* am the one making threats now. And without that wand, you will be *yourself* again. I am trying to *save* you, you ungrateful boy. You were a good son before that wand." That was the first news Draco had ever heard of that. "And once you no longer have it, you *will* behave properly as a Malfoy again. It must fall on me to destroy it." But somehow he thought it a good idea to bend down and pick it up before casting Fiendfyre on it or something.

"No, wait, Father," Draco called, casting his own self-preservation instincts as much into question as Harry's had ever been. It was too late anyway, as Father picked up the talon wand and dropped it as soon as he had, crying out in pain. His right hand went to his left, seizing it in agony and dropping his own wand. Draco rolled his eyes and went over to easily pick up both wands. "Why would you do that, Father? You know what it did to Mother. Now you have matching brands, was that your intention? How unusually romantic of you..."

"Undo this!" Father bellowed, "You wicked bastard child-"

"See, calling me a bastard is dangerously close to speaking ill of my mother," Draco drawled, keeping both wands pointed at Father. "And you know what happens to tongues that speak ill of me or my associates. You remember."

"You will pay for this," Father growled, but when Draco ordered to him to pick up and repack the Potions ingredients, he did.

"You know," Draco sighed, "You really hurt my *feelings*, Father. I think I'm going to need more Acromantula venom to pay for my emotional damages."

Father stalked over to the venom, sack in hand. "How much?" he spat.

"All of it," Draco said, and when Father turned to stare at him with murder in his eyes, Draco just held up Father's wand. "You might recall, I don't know if Mother told you, that wands other than mine have a bad habit of dissolving when I try to use them. Should I try to summon the venom for myself with your wand instead, and make an experiment of it?" Father packed the venom into the sack with shaking hands, the sound of the brand sizzling against the glass of the jars, but not enough to contaminate it. "Don't worry, Father, you know the brand stops hurting soon enough."

"What is this brand?" Father bit out, clutching his wrist once Draco took the sack of ingredients from him. "What does it do?" And oh, if that wasn't the best invitation ever to tell him about the so-called Talon Brand, but Draco was trying to stick to Severus's orders more. And he wasn't sure if his father would believe it anyway. "Who else has it?"

"Karkaroff, for one," Draco said, "But you already knew that, right?" A strange impulse seized Draco, and he knew little would probably come of it even as he asked, "Father, what is Karkaroff up to?"

"What," Father growled, "Do you want now, you malformed demon child?"

"Karkaroff's Dark Mark is getting darker again and all that," Draco said casually. "Yours must be too, right?" Draco could see where clutching the wrist of his hurt hand had pushed up the left sleeve. Father was usually so careful, but a darker version of his Mark was indeed visible, just the bottom. Father quickly pushed his sleeve down when Draco saw.

"I know Karkaroff is planning something, and Father- if you could help, if you could bring it to Dumbledore, you could switch sides. Whatever the Dark Lord is going to do, it's not too late. I know you have the Mark, but Severus switched sides before, so you can-"

"Why," Father groaned, "Do you persist in meddling in affairs you do not understand? Does my fourteen-year-old son think he knows better than me how I should live my life?"

Draco considered this. "Um. Yes?" He squared his shoulders, forcing himself to look Father in the eye, though it was difficult. Less difficult with both of the wands in his hands. "Father, I just don't want you to choose the losing side. You don't *have* to do anything about Karkaroff, just- if the Dark Lord calls you, if the Mark summons you, don't go. You got away with it once, don't get yourself back into it. You can survive, you can protect Mother- you can protect me-"

"And what," Father hissed, "Makes you think I would ever have any desire to protect you anymore?"

It scared Draco sometimes how alike he and his father sounded. He preferred his resemblance to Severus, but he had too much of his father's phrasing and temper in him still. "Because I'm your son," Draco said weakly. It came out almost like a question.

"Are you?" Father said coldly. "You have what you came for. Give back my wand and get out. The wards will be closed to you should you attempt to return."

Harry was sulky with Draco when he joined them at the Three Broomsticks, even though Draco left out the part where he'd squabbled with his father. He remained so until Draco had to break his own resolution that Monday afternoon, when Draco asked him if the Gryffindors had gotten to the centaur uprisings yet in History of Magic, and Harry snapped at him, "Do your own bloody work, you prick!"

"Okay," Draco said slowly. "Don't yell like that around Luna, it upsets her." He ignored Luna's little whisper of *I'm fine* like she wanted to see the drama. "Come on, let's go for a walk."

Harry followed him all the way to the dungeons, though he stopped when he saw Draco was leading him towards Severus's chambers. "Oh, no," he said, stopping fast. "No. Definitely not."

"He won't *be* there," Draco whined, which he knew were famous last words of his, but it was true this time. Severus would already be on his way to dinner. "And I want us to talk alone. Come on, it's not like it would be the first time any of you went there since he set Dementors on us." Harry looked flummoxed by how casually Draco blew past that detail. "He let Luna in to have Christmas with us, and then me and Luna and Hermione got ready for the Yule Ball there together."

Draco saw Harry's face darken at the mention of the Yule Ball, which Draco understood all too well now. He knew he had behaved like an absolute arse to Harry over all of that, though honestly, if Harry *told* him he'd only wanted to go as friends, how was Draco supposed to know he'd been lying? Harry followed him anyway, though, barely managing to repress his shivers at both the temperature and the macabre sight of Severus's chambers. Draco cast a curt Focillo on him and bustled him in anyway.

Once there, though, Harry got sidetracked by the tapestry that hadn't been there before. "I gave it to him for Christmas," Draco told him. "Livens the place up, huh?"

"Is that a deer in the woods?" Harry asked, looking fascinated. "It's beautiful. It's silver..."

"I had it made," Draco explained. "It's supposed to be a Patronus. That's the form that Severus's takes."

Harry looked thoughtful. "Remus told me that his Patronus is a wolf, and Sirius's is a dog, but that my parents' were both deer. My father's a stag, my mother's a doe. Funny, to think my mother and Professor Snape would have the same one..."

"Yeah, funny," Draco said, fighting not to blanch at that information. Any hope he'd held out that Severus hadn't really carried a torch for Lily Potter had gone up in smoke. Poor Severus.

"So what is it?" Harry said defensively, leaning beside the tapestry with arms crossed.

Draco refused to engage in his confrontational air. Or let himself remember how that leaning body had felt in his arms, when they'd hugged for long outside the hospital wing. "I'm not a mind-reader, Harry. You're going to have to tell me why you're pissed at me this time. Is it to do with Hogsmeade?" Harry's face told him he was right. "You know I have to make the potion for Remus-"

"You said we'd go to every Hogsmeade weekend together!" Harry exploded, standing up straight and advancing on Draco menacingly. "And there might not be any more after the last one. So you said we'd do them all, but out of three, we've only gone together *once*! And even then, we met the others at the Three Broomsticks after!" It was like he had to negotiate for Draco's time.

Even if the subject of his upset was childish, Harry's anger was always a thing to behold. "I'm sorry, okay? I know Hogsmeade was supposed to be, like, a friendship-building thing for us. And I'd invite you to go flying, honestly I would, but Severus took away my flying permission, so..."

"Why?" Harry frowned, and Draco decided to throw him a bone with the truth this time.

"It wasn't much," Draco said casually. "He really overreacted. All I did was follow Karkaroff after he showed up in potions and threaten and curse him a bit-"

"DRACO!"

"Just a bit!" Draco whined, and pouted. "Don't you get mad at me too, Dragonslayer, I'm not strong enough to stand up to your wrath-"

"I think you could stand up to anyone," Harry said, eyes more serious as he said it, like Draco was some kind of formidable warrior, and not the boy who'd spent his entire time down the trapdoor with him in first year shrieking at the top of his lungs. "Ron said you've learned to duel really well, and that you're super confident. I can't believe you had a duel with him and not me-"

"Harry," Draco groaned, astonished at the depths Harry was willing to sink for his attention. "I challenged Ron to a duel because I was *angry.* Dueling me is not a *reward.*"

Harry's jaw set stubbornly, that jaw that seemed to look more hewn and perfect every day, less of a child's face and more masculine solidity. "It's just something else you left me out on. You always do that, Draco, you leave me out on purpose. Except if you need something-"

Merlin, this was going to end in Harry demanding the Marauder's Map back, wasn't it? That would be disastrous to his plans for brewing Naufragiam. "You name it, then!" Draco exclaimed. "What do you want, if Hogsmeade is all done? What, do you *want* to duel me?"

"Yeah," Harry said stubbornly, "I think I'd like that. I want you to give me dueling lessons."

Draco's ears couldn't be working right. "You mean *you* want to give *me* lessons?"

"No," Harry said impatiently. "You're the one who's been in real duels, aren't you? You used to go flying with Ron every week. Well, I want one night a week to learn how to duel for real from you. We can go to that room you conjured. Actually, wouldn't it be good for you too? To get practice, so you know your limits, and you don't get magical exhaustion as much?"

Just the thought of the Room of Requirement, even if the dueling room shouldn't be so bad, was enough to make Draco almost instinctively say no. Not to mention the need not to be in small closed spaces alone with Harry, and the fact that dueling was dangerous-

Wait. Dangerous enough to draw blood?

"Okay, fine," Draco said, "We can have weekly dueling lessons."

And not at all because I'm after your blood.

There was a letter from Charlie, finally, which Theo read to Draco. He perched on the edge of Draco's bed, while Draco reclined back and tried not to fall asleep. Apparently the information sent from Ollivander had been more than enough to identify the dragon who had been the source of the wand, although Charlie claimed to have thought that dragon was a mere myth until looking into it: Astaroth. Astaroth, he said, was a byword in dragontamer circles for the worst case scenario. Exactly what you did not want to happen.

"He's forwarded a letter from a Mr. Taylor from New Zealand, who works on the Aoraki Reserve there. His grandfather is deceased, but he worked there too, as did his father. The grandfather worked with the dragon Astaroth, which he said was real. He would tell his grandson stories." Theo shot Draco a sidelong glance. "Are you sure you want to hear this? It's not pretty. His grandfather was the only dragontamer who worked with Astaroth who *did* survive it."

"You're loving this, aren't you, Theo?" Draco laughed. "Maybe you can write a book about all this when it's done." Theo gave him a startled look. "That is what you want to do after Hogwarts, isn't it? To write books? Be a real author, histories and legends like that?"

"How did you know that?" Theo asked warily, because of course he'd never told Draco that in the red line. Draco just gave him a mysterious look, and Theo looked back at the letter with a heaving sigh.

"Let's see, there's pleasantries... a bit about how rare it is for an Opaleye to hurt anything bigger than a sheep, but you know all about dragons..."

"Yeah, they're some of the most beautiful *and* gentle dragons. Although there was that thing with kangaroos. I take it Astaroth was the exception to the rule?"

"'My grandfather would always tell the story the same'," Theo read. "'He had worked at the Cathedral Reserve, at the foot of the Cathedral Peaks, for only a few months before he was called back to Sydney in 1891 for his mother's funeral. When he returned in a fortnight, the reserve was rubble, and every dragon and dragontamer was dead or disappeared."

Despite himself, Draco felt a chill go down his spine. "Where did they go?"

"'It took three hundred wizards to bring Astaroth down'," Theo read, jaw set in a way that showed his own disquiet. "'His body was massively engorged, though still capable of flight and battle. When it was taken down and cut open, the decomposing flesh of every missing dragon and dragontamer was found inside.' Although you'd think at that point it might be hard to tell."

"He *ate* them?" Draco breathed, sitting up finally. "Ate them *all*?"

The corner of Theo's lip twitched. "You would think he would have gotten indigestion. Taylor says it was never known what caused Astaroth to go mad, or become so strong. In his grandfather's experience, nothing had made Astaroth stand out amongst the other dragons, save the demonic name, and the temperament. 'He had been called Astaroth as a jest, because he was amongst the most docile and sweet of the dragons.' So it was known as the Cathedral Massacre, Astaroth's corpse was buried in the burnt unhallowed ground of the Cathedral Reserve, abandoned henceforth, and forbidden for any to visit."

"So how did the heartstring of Astaroth end up in *wands*?" Draco breathed, hand tightening on the talon wand in his pajama pocket. Theo's sharp blue eyes noted the motion, but did not comment on it.

"Because there *was* a visitor there, right before the turn of the century. 'Grandfather said he would never forget him. Blond and tall and terrifying, without the ability to hear the word no.' It's not clear why the grandfather did it, whether it was fear or bribery or trickery, but he took the foreign wizard to the site of the massacre, and the wizard unearthed the corpse of Astaroth and took what little remained of the rotted heart. 'He said he would take it to the wandmaker Gregorovitch in Germany, and inquired of how to preserve it for the journey. Grandfather advised him, he obeyed, and before he departed, he cast a terrible spell to destroy the rest of the corpse. That was the last he ever saw of the man more fearsome than Astaroth.'"

"He didn't know who the man was?"

Theo put the letter down, examining Draco with a smirk. "The name is right there. I just thought you'd have already guessed. Context clues, Draco. Aren't you meant to be brilliant?" Draco just blinked at him, throat gone dry. Theo lifted up the book from beside Draco's pillow. "Don't you think you'd better let me read his book now?"

And it was the name in the letter, like a slash of red across the page. Draco refused to let it frighten him. He put on a good face for Theo, and haughtily commanded him to write to Gregorovitch about the story. Theo agreed, and took *Manifestos of the Great Gellert Grindelwald* with him.

Draco put Harry off until next Monday, saying he needed to prepare for the dueling lessons, which really meant he needed all the time he could muster to work on his secret potions. Harry agreed, looking happier than Draco had seen him since he survived the Norwegian Ridgeback. Maybe the boy just really enjoyed putting himself in danger. Got off on it, even.

Well, he would have to, wouldn't he, to fancy Draco Malfoy?

The remaining supplies were due to arrive by mail order on the 16th, which meant that on the 13th, he set up his cauldron in the Shrieking Shack, looking more at the Marauder's Map than his surroundings as he snuck there. He was glad he'd gotten more than enough tincture to submerge the pomegranate seeds fully. That part was easy. Now he just had to wait, and hope the Witch's Ganglion and Death's Head hawk moths arrived on time.

They weren't there by the night of the 15th, which had Draco going off to prepare for the dueling lesson even more anxiously than he already would have been. He managed to get the black oval room for dueling from last time, and Harry didn't have any trouble letting himself in. He had changed into Muggle clothes, jeans and a red knit jumper, which meant the lines of his body were more visible. Draco made sure to tell him off for it, saying he'd be doing most all his real dueling in robes, so there wouldn't be a repeat of that. It would be hard enough to teach a Gryffindor anything without having to try not to get distracted staring at Harry Potter's arse. An arse Harry would probably let him touch if he wanted-

Draco couldn't think about that. "Okay, Harry. We're going to start with the most basic thing you need to get good at in dueling: shielding. Let's see how good your shielding spells are."

"Shielding?" Harry said, with a look on his face like Draco had cancelled Christmas. "What about the fireball you do? I want to learn the fireball."

Merlin, it was like Harry was still eleven. "I'm not teaching you anything until your shields are strong enough to meet my standards. I got a book on dueling for Christmas, you know, I'm not just pulling all this out of my arse. Shields are where they start in that too."

Harry was already in possession of a decent Protego, though lean into a spell a bit and Draco found himself generally able to break it, casting Expelliarmus or a soft Everte statum. He set Harry to trying to hold his shields as long as possible, time after time. Draco had set an hourglass for two hours, the recommended maximum length of any session in the book. By the time the hourglass was half-done, Harry was drenched in sweat, with Draco immaculate in his Slytherin uniform. "This is like torture," Harry groaned. "Why did I think this would be fun?"

"Oh, you don't want to know how to hold off twenty stunning spells at once like I did? That was a shield, Harry, in case that escaped your notice-"

"But you didn't use Protego then, did you?" Harry frowned. "I think you used another incantation back then."

"Protego horribilis," Draco told him. "We can get to that later, if you like. I'll teach you that after Fianto duri."

"Where did you learn all this?" Harry marveled. "That book?"

"No, Uncle Sirius," Draco said absently, spinning his wand.

"He taught you those spells?" Harry asked, visibly jealous.

"Well," Draco said sheepishly. "Er, not exactly." Harry gave him an expectant look. "He may have used them to shield against me in a duel. So anyway, Protego horribilis can be used generally as a stronger version of a shield charm, but it's particularly useful against dark magic, hence the name-"

"You cast *dark magic* against my *godfather*?"

Draco backed away slowly from Harry's flashing eyes, raising both his hands. "Okay, well, um, I didn't *not* cast dark magic against your godfather... so anyway! Protego horribilis!"

Harry proved a fine hand at Protego horribilis, as if he was particularly strong at light magic, anything specifically to fortify against the dark. Draco thought his assessment results would have turned out very different from Draco's. Fianto duri, he struggled with, as Draco remembered Uncle Sirius telling him it was a NEWT-level spell. But eventually he managed to get some semblance of a shield up with it, just like he'd managed in one session to get up some semblance of a Patronus.

"I'm sorry I'm so terrible at this," Harry sighed, wiping his sweat-soaked face and sitting, with the towel and chair the room had provided for his requirements. Draco sat beside him, ready to launch into the discussion section that the dueling book said was vital to answer any of the pupil's questions, and allow them to recognize their mistakes and learn. "You make it look so easy..."

"Harry," Draco said, scoffing, "That's just practice. Way more practice than I ever wanted to get. You're the one who's good at this. You're a natural. Just like at Quidditch. It's kind of annoying, really..." Harry's eyes lit up at the praise, and the sight of him so happy for Draco's approval sent Draco's mind to awful directions, like, what else would he do for my approval... what else could I train him to do to my satisfaction... "There's only one protection spell I know that's worth much beside that, and I've never actually tried it, it's too difficult for me."

"What spell?" Harry asked eagerly, and Draco could tell he was trying to stretch out the session even though the hourglass had emptied.

"Protego Diabolica," Draco told him. "I read about it in a book on Grindelwald." That didn't get the horror he expected. "Harry, you do know who Grindelwald was, don't you?" Maybe Harry would be more frightened if he learned, as Draco had recently, the unexpected bit Draco and Grindelwald had in common.

"Yes!" Harry protested hotly. "I'm not *that* bad at History of Magic! Not that we ever get to do much about the interesting parts like that. So what does it do?"

"It makes a ring of blue flame around you," Draco said, "An impassible barrier, except for your friends. If someone is your enemy, trying to pass through will kill them."

"Wow!" Harry said, leaping out of his seat. "You should try it!"

Draco was seriously considering inviting Hermione to their next session to put a stop to this kind of behavior. "It's dark magic, you know."

"You do dark magic all the time," Harry said impatiently, clapping his hands together. "What, do you think you're not powerful enough to cast it successfully?"

Draco's pride was stung, and he felt that as a warning sign he might be about to do something stupid. "It's not that. It's just way too dangerous. I'm not about to go casting any fire spells in such a small space-"

Harry rolled his eyes. "Draco, there are literal scorch marks on the walls."

So those had never gone away. He hadn't noticed. "If you let me finish, I would say, fire spells where I don't know what I'm *doing*-"

Harry sighed, fanning at his flushed sweaty face, then sighed and pulled his jumper off over his head. The plain white T-shirt beneath rode up with the jumper, exposing a flash of the narrow definition of Harry's taut abdomen before he pulled the shirt back down. "So you're too scared."

Draco knew he shouldn't, and yet he heard himself saying, "Of course I'm not *scared*, Harry. Of course I can *do* it. Just don't go haunting me if it gets you killed."

Harry's face broke into a huge smile. "Okay, stand back," said Draco, "Get behind those glass booths, come on. I'll try and keep the flame circle smaller than that. Try not to pass out from the fumes, alright, Chosen One?"

"Go ahead," Harry called challengingly. "Try and make me pass out, *Frankenstein*."

The sound of the nickname on Harry's lips made Draco's own mouth go dry. He couldn't think anymore what a terrible idea this was. All he could think about was not looking stupid in front of Harry Potter. "Alright," Draco said, and walked to the exact center of the room, before raising his wand. "You ready, Harry? Last warning."

"Try it!" Harry yelled, and Draco closed his eyes.

"Protego Diabolica!" he called, making the wand motion from the book, and nothing happened. "Protego Diabolica!" He made the motion the opposite way, and there was nothing. "Protego Diabolica!" He tried it the first way, and nothing still, though he saw blue sparks at the tip of the talon.

"Is something supposed to be happening?" Harry called.

Draco gritted his teeth. "Normally I have to visualize these things. Wait." Draco lifted his wand and cast Diffindo, walking in a slow circle around the radius of the room, a few meters

ahead of the glass cage. Harry was pressed against the glass, hands flattened on, leaned forward watching him eagerly, and any doubt that had crept in whether he was doing something irreparably dangerous fell away at the sight of the excitement in those perfect green eyes.

Draco walked back to the center. "Okay, I'm gonna try again," he called, and closed his mouth, centering himself, imagining blue flames. He could make white-hot blue flames with Lacarnum inflamari, and this couldn't be that different. And Periander had said his dark magic was potent, and his strongest magical element was fire. Draco didn't think he'd been lying about those things. He remembered the feeling in that assessment of letting loose the Lacarnum inflamari until it ripped the chain from its hinges, envisioned the line he'd cut filling with billowing gusts of icy fire, and opened his eyes. "Protego Diabolica!"

And it worked. It actually worked. Draco was so startled, when he'd been expecting just sparks, and found the end of the talon wand emitting a large burst of flames. He had to concentrate to start guiding them around the circle he wanted, with the beauty of them the most shocking part of it. They looked hot, and he felt that in the air, the space around the spreading flames starting to shimmer and palpitate with heat haze. But the heat didn't affect him, like this was a fire that would leave only him untouched. It looked like Incendio glacius, except instead of staying ice, the ice itself began to burn. He remembered the description in the book of Grindelwald elegantly guiding the flames like a conductor in an orchestra. Draco could see how you would find music in an art like this, melodies like lilting tongues of promise made of fire. The sight of Harry's spellbound frame still pressed against the glass made Draco want to show off, to be elegant and irresistible. Even if anyone sane would find this display the most horrifying thing they'd ever seen.

In that case, Harry Potter was definitely not sane. He was grinning breathlessly against the glass, not afraid of him at all, even now. Draco turned in a slow circle, whipping the flames around the cut loop, feeling his robes whip behind him. The flames looked at once like fire and water and a mass of blue smoke and light, whiter at the center fading to a deep indigo in the haze at the edges. It was jumping up in small bursts and fading back and down like it had a will of its own, but it was nothing like Fiendfyre. And not just because Draco could take hold of those gusts up and down, and make them rise and fall spreading his fire for him at well. It was not orange, there were no faces, it was in a shape, and it seemed almost pure. As if anything that was against Draco, he could purify the world of it...

He couldn't even tell if he had any control over the magic pent up in the talon wand anymore. It felt like there was no distinction between his wand and his hand, between the *flames* and his hand. He painted them thicker and higher until the circle was a true seal, and Harry only a dim figure behind the heart-of-winter blue. Draco had never felt such raw magic course through him, and yet it did not seem to be draining him. It felt completely under his control, like the entire world was under his judgment.

"Go ahead!" he yelled to Harry. "Go ahead and try it! Walk in the fire and see if I'm your enemy!"

"Really?" Harry yelled, and Draco let out an elegant surge of flames.

"Scared, Potter?" he called, and heard a defiant *You wish* before Harry stepped forward.

Draco had never expected Harry to take him seriously, or have the courage to attempt the ring of fire. But come forward he did.

The dim figure of Harry moved from behind the glass cage, and panic spiked through Draco. "Let's see if it works!" Harry called, and Trelawney's prophecy went through Draco's mind- every choice he had ever made- everything he had ever said or done to Harry to bring him here, to his death, because Draco was his enemy, he was lying to him, holding back *everything*- he was going to be Harry's *doom*, if he loved him, and he- he-

Draco tried to call for Harry not to come, but his voice died in his throat, and his fear only made the flames blaze higher, like his fear for Harry had wrested the control away from him. He didn't want the fire to burn if it could hurt Harry, and yet it burned.

"It won't kill me unless you're my enemy, right?" Harry called out, and walked into the fire.

Draco screamed, the fire flaring to the dark ceiling, scorching it a rustier black. Fire was no longer pouring out the end of the talon wand, but the entire world was already covered in pillars of flickering blue flame, with Harry swallowed inside one, as fatal as Draco had always known it would be for him to trust-

And then Harry Potter strode out from the fire, flame billowing behind him in every direction, as huge a halo as any angel could wish for. Draco had thought he was beautiful drawing the sword from the Basilisk's mouth. But he had never seen anything half so beautiful as Harry emerging untouched from Draco's flames. He was grinning, the mad bastard, and walked as confidently towards Draco as if they were in the Gryffindor common room.

Draco charged at Harry and tried to hit him. Harry laughed, dodging Draco's half-hearted swipe at his face with his open hand, and caught Draco against him. He grabbed Draco's wrists when he tried to claw at him, still laughing. He only seemed to realize something was wrong when he heard how fast Draco was breathing. "You... God, you, Harry- I could have killed you," Draco babbled, barely aware of what he was saying, and if he couldn't hit Harry, he could let him hold him. Harry let go of Draco's wrists when they calmed, let Draco seize him by the shoulders and then link his palms securely around his neck. Draco felt his nails digging into the backs of his hands on top, so hard he wanted to hold onto Harry, and yet that light feeling was going into his fingers, making them buzz.

"You told me to go," Harry said, still so blindly trusting. "Was it not safe, Draco?"

"It's *dark fire!*" Draco gasped. "Why did you *listen* to me?"

"I knew you weren't my enemy," Harry said, "And see, this proves it. Not that it needed proving," he said hastily as Draco opened his mouth. "God, Draco, calm down, I trust you..."

"You shouldn't!" Draco yelled, which meant he could not breathe for a good long while. Hands shaking, he ran them through Harry's dark hair, trying to reassure himself Harry was there and unhurt and still real, still not lost to him. "Did it occur to- to you... Harry, you- that- that I could have gotten the spell wrong, and that... that burns, burns the same- real fire, Harry-"

"I trust you," Harry repeated, and pressed a kiss to Draco's neck, nosing aside Draco's hair to press his face there. "Draco," he breathed, mouth hot against Draco's earlobe, "You're incredible. You're the most incredible person I've ever met."

"And you- you're the *stupidest*," Draco gasped, linking his palms again, even as the press of Harry's chest against his, the embrace sinking in with their weight going lax against each other, reminded Draco that Harry was the best, and that was the problem too. "Why would you do that? I would- would have- would have *killed* you, don't you... you don't get it... how can you *trust* me-"

"Because," Harry said, sighing into Draco's hair and nuzzling there in that needy heart-rending way of his. "You're a dragon, and dragons control fire. See, Draco, you were right when you told me dragons were real. You're a dragon..."

And you're a stag. "You were that sure that I'm not your-" Then Draco realized he was thinking of it all wrong, just as Harry was. The spell prevented enemies from crossing the threshold, but *whose* enemies? An enemy was someone who was disloyal to you, who wanted to harm you or put you in danger or lied to you. And what would the point of a protection spell be if it wasn't to keep out the caster's enemies, the people who wanted to hurt the *caster*? The way the caster felt about the people walking into the fire- even if the caster was *their* enemy, and wanted to hurt *them*, it shouldn't matter, the spell was just protection...

But if Harry misunderstood the spell as magical proof of Draco's loyalty, Draco was not in a place to correct him.

Draco's head was too full of noise. "Calm down," Harry breathed, hands sliding up from Draco's waist to massage at his back. "You're so clamped up. It's alright now, Draco, everything's going to be fine..." Harry took Draco by the hand and walked them together through to the other side of the flames. Harry sat him on the chair in the cage. Draco focused on his breathing, trying to hold back the feeling of bile growing in his lungs, while Harry got him a draught of peace. He could feel his heartbeat in his neck, his chest, his ears, his legs, his fingertips, like he was going to be slowly beaten to pieces from inside himself by his own heartbeat...

Harry gave him the draught. Draco downed it in one gulp, and demanded the calming draught as well. Harry didn't begrudge it to him. Draco finished that too, then grabbed both of Harry's hands, seizing them and pressing them to his face, burying it against them as he panted for breath. It was reassuring, that touch, that proof Harry was safe, was here, was not ruined by Draco completely.

Not yet.

Naufraga Captivare

Chapter Notes

Playlist

Draco began the brewing of Naufragiam the next day, once the remaining ingredients arrived in their extensive, careful packaging by owl post. He found the pomegranate seeds looked to have completely disappeared inside the tincture. That seemed apropos, given that it was tincture of *Demiguise*, but he wished the book had been more specific on that point. He kept the book with the recipe marked, along with a small station he'd established for safe ingredient storage, and of course the cauldron on its stand with magical insulation against any fire spreading. He put on a new pair of black suede gloves, which he planned to use only for this potion. He added three more pomegranate seeds, and watched them float in the tincture, which looked the same as when he'd added it. He double-checked the book, but it didn't say that the second set had to be left to soak like the first had. So he added octopus powder, typical as a strengthening agent, and turned on the heat. Cautiously.

He'd dried the nightshade and Niffler's fancy leaves in anticipation of this night, but he had to chop them now. His hands were shaking, whether in new nervousness or just aftershocks of the panic attack Harry had made him have, there was no telling. He forced himself to calm down, telling himself he had all night if need be. He mixed them, added them to the cauldron once the tincture finally began to steam, and here came the valuable parts. He had a spare Witch's Ganglion, but only one. He'd never used one of these before, they were more common in Asia, and it felt almost sacrilegious to just chuck one in whole, but that was what the recipe said, nothing about chopping. Then in went the Acromantula venom. It said to stir vigorously, as the last instruction before boiling it on low for a month. He'd have to check it daily, to make sure it hadn't gone off completely, and really, the invisibility cloak would have been useful. Maybe he should start making more visits to Hagrid as a cover to be out here...

What was wrong with him? He had let his attention drift away, stirring mechanically with already shaking hands, while thinking about something else. While making a *blood ritual potion.* Maybe Severus was right that he was getting arrogant. At least the Acromantula venom had merged largely with the tincture mixture, and the leaves were dissolving, leaving a murky brown color with flecks still of bright gold. But the Witch's Ganglion just sat there, its big blood-red bulb floating on the surface like someone meant to bob for apples from a dirty barrel. The leaves began to wilt and fall off, but the Witch's Ganglion didn't even look bothered by the heat, looking like some kind of arctic radish. The recipe hadn't specified how long to stir, but would it go without saying that he should stay and stir until all the ingredients were incorporated, even this?

Or would it go without saying that he *shouldn't*?

This was why it would have been better if he could have done this with Severus.

In the end, he decided that he was not going to allow the entire wizarding world to perish because he had been too lazy to do some extra stirring. And it took hours, around three to be precise, by which he had gone to alternating between stirring with the spoon in hand and with his wand guiding it from the air. But eventually, the bulb dissolved. Draco put the spare Witch's Ganglion in the deepest place in his new ingredient storage cabinet. He never wanted to see another one of these bulbs for the whole time he lived.

Naufragiam had another blessing: it filled in where being banned from Divination had given some respite, and made his schedule finally busy enough that he didn't have to think.

He had a full course load with all the basic classes and his two electives, Ancient Runes and Arithmancy, which he had never studied in the blue line. He had to do his own work for them and assist the inept Harry and Ron with theirs, and sometimes Neville. He had extra potions lessons with Severus for three hours every Sunday. He started up playing football again with Dean, Seamus, and Hermione when it was warmer. He and Hermione checked on the Wolfsbane Potion daily. He checked on Naufragiam daily. He gave Harry his weekly dueling lessons for hours on Monday nights, having been wheedled into continuing them despite his misgivings. He took daily baths in Angel's Infusion, and brewed Valerian tea daily for his anxiety. He studied and re-studied his invisible ink notebooks, he visited the kitchens daily to read the Quibbler cover-to-cover with Dobby and Luna, played Wizard's chess with Ron, brainstormed about the talon wand with Theo while they waited for letters, and he never allowed himself to think past the task immediately before him, trusting exhaustion to do the work of that for him. Except for a half hour every night. In that half hour, he let himself think of whatever he wanted. And inevitably, locked inside his soundproofed bed curtains, his mind only ever went to one person. One with very green eyes.

But no fantasy could compare to the reality of the elation he felt when he and Hermione finished their next batch of Wolfsbane at the end of the month, and it was, by all appearances, perfect. Hermione counseled caution until Remus had tested it, but Draco wanted to hang from the rafters and scream to the heavens that they'd done it. He'd seen Severus brew enough successful batches to know the look of one. And so it proved to be, as Harry passed a message on weeks later that Remus had taken it for a week before the full moon, and been able to curl up peacefully during his transformation and sleep like a baby.

See, Draco thought viciously towards whatever cruel entity governed his fate, a power that in his mind usually tended to look like the mirror he had fallen through into the red line. *See, I don't fail at* everything*, do I?*

He failed at keeping the Naufragiam secret. He was so close, so damn close to making it the full month undetected, with the aid of the Marauder's Map. But he always had to go late on Sunday nights, with extra Potions stretching particularly late that night after Draco had spoiled two straight batches of Veritaserum. Sometimes, Draco found to his peril, he found himself getting some of the many potions he was working on confused with each other. He couldn't let that happen with the Naufragiam. That was the one that would have Harry Potter's blood in it, if he could manage it.

Harry had been pressing him to work on offensive spells, and to have more than very tame practice duels, ever since their first session, the Protego Diabolica fiasco notwithstanding. The problem was that Harry didn't see it as a fiasco, and sometimes spoke of it fondly as "the coolest thing he had ever seen." But in this, Harry's willingness to wade blindly into danger would serve Draco well. He planned out a lesson with Everte statum, Depulso, and most importantly Diffindo, if he couldn't get Harry slammed enough in the face to make him bleed without outright cutting him. He had that lesson on his mind, and didn't look at the Marauder's Map properly that one solitary trip from the dungeons to the Shrieking Shack, and that was his undoing.

Draco tapped on the Weeping Willow to open it, and only once the cavernous tunnel had opened before him, did a voice say behind him, "Where does that go to?"

He knew the voice, and that kept him from drawing his wand as he whirled around. It did not, however, keep him from falling over his own feet. He might be overworking himself. Or maybe it was just the sight of Luna standing there holding a lantern, the least stealthy operative imaginable with her long bright hair loose, and small frame dwarfed in a very bright pink coat. She gave him a hand up, and Draco glanced nervously between her and the entrance.

It would be one thing if she hadn't seen what he'd done to open it, but she'd seen the procedure and the passage. She could come back without him whenever she wanted to see inside. There might be locking or warding charms he could use to hold her off. Draco didn't know the magic of the Shrieking Shack, nor were those a particular specialty of his. Could he think of a lie to throw her off? Was he about to have to Obliviate his own cousin?

"Draco," Luna said, squeezing his hand, "I didn't mean to scare you. Whatever it is, I won't tell anyone. I promise."

Harry had trusted Draco enough to walk through fire. Draco would never have put that amount of trust in Harry back, if only because he didn't trust *himself* around Harry. And he would have thought he could put complete trust in Hermione, but not in this. She was just too tied to Harry to take it on faith that Draco *had* to make a potion with blood magic and feed it to him unknowing to save him from the Dark Lord kidnapping him by Portkey. She wanted explanations of everything, and her loyalties were always divided. But Luna... could he trust Luna with this?

He might not have a choice. He could bring her in as co-conspirator, swear or guilt or menace her into secrecy, or Obliviate her. Somehow, Draco found himself picking the first of those options. It was like he didn't even *know* himself anymore.

"Okay, Luna, you caught me. You wanna see something?" She nodded excitedly, holding her lantern higher, and Draco understood. This was just another little adventure to her, like when she'd been Draco's second in a duel- and wait, he always thought about trying not to corrupt Luna. Was he really about to involve her in *blood magic*? Maybe he could just tell her what it was and she'd agree to leave it alone... "How did you catch me?"

"I was waiting for you outside Severus's chambers," Luna said, "Even though it's late, because I wanted to ask you about something. But you walked out looking very purposeful

and mysterious, so I followed you."

And Draco hadn't looked behind himself or at the Marauder's Map once. Luna wasn't exactly an easy sight to miss. "Come inside, then. It's safe," Draco sighed wearily, and led her into the tunnel to the Shrieking Shack. She'd heard the stories behind its so-called haunting by now, so she was completely unafraid as they followed her light down the tunnel. He remembered Uncle Sirius having shown Severus this way, in that awful memory, and reminded himself that he wasn't necessarily leading Luna into peril- well, not *that* much peril...

"What's this?" Luna cried out, homing in on the bubbling cauldron instantly, and ran over to kneel beside it. Draco gestured not to touch it, and she braced her hands on her knees, gazing into the murky depths of it.

"Don't breathe it in," Draco instructed, and thought of conjuring another chair for her, but then was too tired, and sat down beside her on the floor. "Seriously, it's a really dangerous potion."

"Oh no!" Luna said happily. "Could it kill us, do you think?"

"I don't know," said Draco, trying to get that absolute elation out of her voice. He knew she idolized him, but she would be better off not trusting him too this much. Someone needed to sit Harry and Luna down and give them an intervention about that. "But it's dark magic, Luna. Blood magic. From this book," he said, and she looked utterly charmed by *Moste Dark Blood Rituals of the Demon Goddess Hecate.* He supposed this *was* the girl who had gotten him *Manifestos of the Great Gellert Grindelwald* for Christmas.

He hoped she hadn't been picking up an interest in dark magic, trying to be just like her favorite cousin.

Although it was narcissistic to take all the credit. Tom Riddle had spent a year with her first. Maybe Luna was so steeped in dark magic, the best Draco could do was show her how to use it properly. Not that he was particularly good at that either. He could show her what *not* to do...

"Naufragiam," she read, and he was pleased to hear her pronounce it "Nah-oo-FRAH-gi-um" the way he always had in his head. It was a sign of how out on a limb Draco was here that he was making a blood magic potion whose name he couldn't pronounce. She read over the rest of the page, as Draco lit up more candles he'd left in the shack, dark red cinnamon-scented ones whose mail order catalog had boasted that their presence 'helped keep potions boiling steady for longer'. It was probably a crock, but at least they smelled pleasant. "Draco, why do you need this?"

Draco leaned his back against the shoddy shack wall, and she leaned hers back beside him, content to be his little twin in everything. That gave him the nerve to admit, "It's for Harry, okay? I'm worried that Karkaroff is planning to try and kidnap him on the day of the tournament final." Lucky he had him to use as the scapegoat instead of naming fake Moody. "It's not one thing in particular- I've been on the Durmstrang ship, I've spoke about Karkaroff with Krum, with Severus, with my father- I think Karkaroff put Harry's name in the Goblet to

set up a kidnapping, to take him to the Dark Lord. His Dark Mark's been getting darker. That means the Dark Lord is getting stronger..."

Draco suddenly remembered Luna had a rather personal relationship with the Dark Lord, but her face hadn't changed at that. She seemed able to separate Voldemort and Tom Riddle in her mind.

"Luna, I just think it's going to happen. And if we give this to Harry, no one will be able to take him away from Hogwarts for days. I know it's psychotic for me to do this, but..."

"No," Luna said, frowning. "If this can keep Harry from being taken away, Draco, then you're right to be doing it. And I'm not just saying that because you're my favorite cousin."

"It's blood magic," Draco reminded her. "Dark, dangerous blood magic that I'm totally unqualified for-"

"Don't say that, Draco," Luna said serenely. "You're the person most qualified to do blood magic that I know."

Draco was startled into a laugh, but she looked completely serious. "Um, thanks, I guess..."

"I want to help!" Luna said brightly, as he'd known she would. She'd been trying to get included in making the Wolfsbane since she'd found out. Maybe she saw this as an extension of the illicit Potions work, and this as her chance to get in on the action.

"Luna," Draco began, "It's too dangerous..."

"Didn't you once tell me," Luna said, her large blue eyes focusing on him meaningfully, "That I could climb down into hell and come back out unscathed?"

"I more meant, um, actually your moral fiber, but..." Draco tried half-heartedly. He spent a few more minutes trying to scare Luna off. She didn't give in, so eventually he did, as he'd known he would. He spent longer swearing her to secrecy in all kinds of differently worded promises, which he lied and told her were magically bonding. She looked so unperturbed by that, even by her standards, that it seemed she really did have no intention of ratting him out. Eventually, they split the work of checking the potion together, and she declared herself RSVP'd formally for the blood ritual.

"It's wonderful we have all the ingredients," Luna said, after inspecting his cabinet. "Well, almost all... how are you going to get Harry's possession and his blood?"

"Possession, I already have," Draco said, thinking of the Gryffindor tie. "No worries about that. The blood... well, I have a plan for that too."

"How are we going to rob Harry Potter of his blood?" she asked chipperly. "Will you bite his neck too hard giving him a hickey?"

"What- no! LUNA! Why would you even think of that? That's disturbing!" Draco exclaimed, though he could feel his face go hot. "We've been practicing dueling together, remember? Why do you think I agreed to that? I'll draw blood in one of our duels when I need it."

"Oh," Luna said, looking unimpressed. "I think my way would be much easier. Or you could just ask him for his blood. He'd probably just give it to you, even if you didn't explain."

"He would *not*," Draco insisted, only for Luna to turn her gleaming eyes on him more squarely. She looked him over thoughtfully as if evaluating the worth of the product on offer.

"Hmm," Luna said. "Well, I don't know about blood, but it would be useful if he could lend us the invisibility cloak for a while. Like with the Marauder's Map. I bet he would do that for you."

"He wouldn't," Draco said with almost more certainty. "Definitely not without a reason, and we can't use Wolfsbane-making as a pretext after this long. That's one of the few things he has passed down from his parents-"

"He would definitely give you the cloak," Luna said with a smile, "Indefinitely, without explaining. All you'd have to do is ask. Oh, and flirt a little, maybe."

"Luna Elizabeth Lovegood," Draco said with a heavy sigh, "The day has come when I have to admit it. It's finally happened. My sweet innocent little cousin is gone. I've corrupted you irreparably."

Luna giggled. "So what does that make me now? Dangerous?"

"Yeah," Draco said, with a slow smile. "Yeah, Luna. I think you can grow up to be dangerous." Then his smile faltered, as he remembered when he'd cast Protego Diabolica, and the sight of Harry Potter walking into blue fire once again filled his chest with an acidic, rueful sort of pain. "But you know, you'll never be as dangerous as me."

Dear Dragon-Face,

So you've taken up teaching Harry some dueling, huh? We'll see if you have a teacher's temperament, but you certainly have the skill. If I hadn't been an Animagus, the one time we dueled, you'd sure have given me a run for my money.

I'm pleased to hear you've found the textbook we gave you useful. I used that textbook myself, when I spent miserable summers in empty rooms at Grimmauld Place, practicing every spell I could think of try and get stronger. Sometimes it was my only consolation, that even if my family didn't believe what I did, and probably never would, that at least I could do a spell right. And I would do even the hardest ones over and over until I managed. The summer before fourth year, I spent an entire month practicing the Disillusionment charm before I could get it right.

Keep in mind, though, that while repetition can be useful, it's also important to make it fun. Harry has a pretty short attention span, I've come to realize. And you can be a bit of a little sourpuss. Please don't take your godfather as an educational model. Not saying anything against my personal savior Severus Snape, believe me, but I think Harry would respond better with a little less stick and a little more carrot.

These lessons will certainly serve him well if our suspicions prove true about Karkaroff. I'm glad Harry has you around him, to protect him if he needs it, and to guide him to become a stronger wizard. You're lucky too, Draco. It's rare for there to be one wizard your age with as much raw magical power and talent as you have, let alone two. Harry being there will help you push yourself in ways you couldn't without him. The two of you complement each other perfectly.

So take care of my godson, and no dueling accidents! And don't let Harry talk you into anything stupid.

Sincerely,

Your Grim-Faced Uncle

P.S. I really can't thank you and Hermione enough for the Wolfsbane Potion. Remus feels the same. We both feel ten years younger, not having had to kick the shit out of each other. Thank Merlin my clever nephew has such clever friends!

Don't let Harry talk you into anything stupid? Too late for that. *No dueling accidents*? Draco was entering that night's duel with the express intent of causing one. Whatever would be enough to make Harry bleed copiously, and be too out of it to realize Draco had taken his blood and stored it in a small opaque black vial he had ready in his pocket.

A little less stick and a little more carrot, huh? That, Draco could do. What counted as carrot? Smiling? Compliments? Sometimes he had to remind himself that Harry had feelings for him, major feelings, as proven by the Second Task, and that gave him power over Harry. He was so used to thinking of himself as having no effect on Harry at all, of always being the one wanting more. But apparently his words, his smile, his touch, were things that Harry must covet, must even dream about, fantasize about when he-

It was good that Harry arrived then, right at eight o'clock sharp like a good boy. He'd learned the hard way that Draco turned over the hourglass right at eight whether or not he was late.

He'd also learned a thing or two about handling Draco. By the time the first hour had elapsed, Draco was beginning to despair of drawing blood after all. Or rather, drawing *Harry's* blood. It wouldn't seem unlikely for his to be shed before they left the Room of Requirement, given how thoroughly Harry was battering him. Draco's shields had once withstood twenty grown wizards at once, but they seemed to snap with alarming regularity against an excited Harry Potter.

"How are you this strong?" Draco complained. Harry had gotten the nerve of Depulso quickly, and made short work dragging dummies all over the room. Everte statum had now proved his excuse to do the same to Draco. After half an hour of it, even the strongest of Draco's shields couldn't keep him from Harry's Everte statum at least driving him back a meter or two. Most of the time, he just went crashing into the wall.

It hadn't helped that Harry hadn't wanted to learn Diffindo, of all the idiotic things, saying he had no intention to cut anyone's skin. Draco had tried to tell him it was useful for more than just dueling, but Draco's example of cutting Potions ingredients had hardly been well-calculated to increase his enthusiasm. Harry had insisted he could learn Diffindo in a class, and wanted to focus on dueling. And so Draco had hit the wall a fair number of times.

The frustrating part was that Harry overestimated him, claiming Draco was letting him on purpose, just holding back like he always did in their duels. "Come on," Harry whined, "I know you can do way better than that. I saw that hellfire you made before. Will you just duel with me for real for once? We've had two formal duels and I know you held back both times-well, the second got canceled because you caused a riot, but still..."

"You want me to duel for real, Harry?" Draco snapped, losing his patience. And he did have the justification how much easier that would make it to get at that sweet savior blood. "Fine, you asked for it. I warned you. But I won't be held accountable for any damages or death-"

"Shouldn't that be my line?" Harry joked, and Draco leveled him with a glare.
"Clearly, I have been going easy on you," Draco said disbelievingly, "If you really think this is like Quidditch, and you being naturally good could be enough to surpass my level of experience over you. You have gotten arrogant, Harry Potter, and I think I'm just the right person to teach you a lesson."

"Go ahead," Harry said, face lighting up. "Do it, Draco. Go ahead and try it. Try to teach me a lesson, and see who gets bloody *taught*!"

"Okay," Draco said, "*Duel.* Turn your back. Three steps back. One, two, three steps. Okay, on the count of three, one, two, three... Protego! Seriously, will you always just start with Expelliarmus? I know it's, like, your own signature spell, but..."

"If this was a real duel," Harry yelled, "Would you be complaining so much?"

"Maybe!" Draco shouted, focusing intently on that potent figure behind a wall of spreading red light. "Fumos!" He took himself and his shield out of the reach of Harry's spell, only for Harry to shout Meteleojinx recanto and aim another Expelliarmus at the same place. Of course, Draco was no longer there.

"Ventus!" Draco yelled, and had the satisfaction of watching Harry be the one thrown up hard against the wall for once. "Flipendo!" he shouted, and Harry whirled about in the air. He laughed, and he saw Harry's face grimace in midair.

"Oppugno!" Harry shouted, and suddenly, improbably enough, Draco had to deal with the one other object in the room, the glass observation cage, attacking him. "Expelliarmus!" Harry shouted, ganging up on him along with the rolling cage, and the red light hit the top of the glass and exploded it over Draco as he ducked.

"Protego!" Draco called. "Finestra!" The glass cage exploded out towards Harry, so Draco reflexively cast Ninguifors to make the glass turn to snow before it could hit him. He heard Harry gasp and stare, and gasp again when Draco used Ninguifors again, a spell he hadn't taught Harry, to turn the rest of the glass to glistening snowflakes. "Ventus!" Draco yelled,

and sent the snow flying in Harry's face. "Aqua eructo duo! Glacius!" A stream of water joined the flying ice crystals, battering Harry against the wall again, and then Draco froze the stream, wide enough to hold him in place-

Only for Harry to shout "Reducto!" and come striding out of his ice prison like some conquering god, robes billowing behind him in the snow-filled wind that still surrounded him. There were snowflakes caught in his thick dark hair. "Everte statum!" he called, and Draco's Protego held, but it forced him all the way back to his own wall, with Harry striding determinedly forward-

Time to end this. Draco was hardly asserting his dominance here, let alone getting any closer to drawing blood. "Baubillious!" Draco yelled, striking the ceiling of the practice room, and hard black stone came crashing down onto Harry. He shielded some off, but some hit him, and he crumpled to the floor. It was Draco's turn to advance, casting Orchideous and then Herbivicus to make flowers grow from the stones. He felt his heart jump when he saw one of the stones that struck Harry's head had given it a bleeding gash. What a sterling person, for that to make him so happy.

"Herbivicus!" he kept casting, using the vines like ropes, as he had in his assessment with Periander. As relatively weak as his earth magic was, Harry hadn't expected it, and it slackened his grip on his wand enough for Draco to easily disarm him, before tightening the thornless roses even more around Harry's body. Where, Draco had to admit in the not-so-bloodthirsty part of his mind, Harry did make quite a picture, tied up in rubble, trapped in a thicket of white roses.

"You wanted me to treat this as a real duel, huh?" Draco drawled, and Harry nodded stubbornly, making a valiant attempt to escape the vines. He did get one wrist free, and that was the excuse Draco needed to call out, "Stupefy!"

Harry crumpled to the ground stunned, and Draco immediately knelt beside him, hands almost shaking in his anxiety to get out the little vial and fill it with Harry's blood. He found there was more enough gushing from that one gash on Harry's head from the stones to fill the vial. He couldn't have planned it any better if he'd tried. He had a deep satisfaction as he pocketed it, feeling like for the first time in his life, he'd genuinely gotten the better of Harry Potter. Even if it was all still in an attempt to save Harry's life.

"Enervate," Draco called, and Harry winced, eyes blinking slowly open. Draco took him to Severus to heal his wounds, making Severus's month to witness Harry in such bleeding and bleary-eyed disarray at the hands of his godson, and that was that. It was done, with Harry none the wiser.

Luna had always had more artistic talent than him. He let her look over every picture they could find in the library of the wheel of Hecate, then design their own one for them, with intricate coils of the snakes that made up the labyrinthine circle. Luna brightly suggested that if Draco ever wanted to make her another piece of jewelry, he could use it as a design, a reminder of one of their fun cousin memories together.

And it was more fun than it should have been, finding themselves a place in the Forbidden Forest the night before the ritual, and beginning to cast the spells to keep the area clear for them, with him and Luna both learning a few new ones from each other. Luna knew a number of things she rationally shouldn't at her age, without him ever having to teach her. It gave him more respect for Xenophilius Lovegood. If it wasn't more that Tom Riddle had rubbed off on her.

It became less fun on the actual night, when all of Luna's confidence seemed to fall away and leave Draco the one to drive them forward. She was less sure retracing her design for Hecate's wheel at midnight, and stepped back and let Draco be the one to carve the shape firmly into the dirt. "What if it's the wrong size?" she fretted.

"The star is supposed to fit all of the ingredients inside," Draco reasoned out, "So since our star is definitely big enough, then the circle should be big enough-"

"But what if it's *too* big?" she persisted, and Draco pocketed his wand and hugged her.

"Luna," Draco coaxed her, "It isn't too late to back out, you know. I can do this part all by myself, you can help me finish the potion part later-"

"No, it's just..." Luna chewed on her lower lip. "I don't want something I did to be the reason this doesn't work and you get hurt, or Harry gets killed, or..."

Welcome to my life, sweet cousin. Wonder why I have these panic attacks? "Relax, Luna. I know what I'm doing. This isn't my first time doing a ritual like this."

"Really?" Luna said, brightening. "Will you tell me about it?"

Draco made a show of checking his watch, though they still had ample time. "Once we're done, okay, Luna?" She nodded, looking reassured, and pulled out the Sleeping Beauty pendant from beneath her shirt and squeezed at the turquoise. "For mental clarity?"

"Yes," said Luna, taking a deep breath, and kept her eyes closed.

"You know what I tell myself when I'm doubting myself at times like this?" Draco offered. "You love your father a whole lot, don't you? You're proud of him? Proud to be his daughter?"

"Oh, yes, I think he's the greatest man in the world," Luna said eagerly. "No one cares more than him about uncovering knowledge and telling the truth, even to power..."

"At times like this, you can tell yourself in your head, 'I'm Xenophilius Lovegood's daughter'. That sort of thing helps me."

But Luna looked unconvinced. "Draco," she said hesitantly. "Does it really help, reminding yourself that you're Lucius Malfoy's son?"

"No, I tell myself that I'm Severus Snape's godson. And that means I can do anything, Luna, especially with a bloody *potion,* that's just child's play. You shouldn't dare doubt us at a mystic potion, when we're Xenophilius Lovegood's daughter, and Severus Snape's godson."

Luna reached out and took his hand. Her palm had grown cold and a bit clammy, from nerves likely as well as the crisp April night, but he could feel resolution in her grip, strengthening his own. The moon came down heavily in the clearing they'd chosen, a waxing moon that cast ample light down on Luna and made her hair look like a great glimmering trail of moonstones. "And I could climb down into hell," Luna said firmly, "And climb out without a scratch on me."

"Let's do this," Draco said, and she nodded. "We can set it all up before midnight. It's just the blood and the incantation that need to be exactly then. The cooled potion first. It says in the shape of the wheel's central star... do you want me to pour it?"

"I'll do it," said Luna. "My hands aren't shaking anymore."

And he waved his wand to intensify the blue flames he had hovering around the surrounding trees, gorgeous non-burning bluebell flames that Hermione had taught him. Not that she would approve the use he was making of them, but hey, everyone was a critic. And Luna did a fine job by that lovely Diabolica-colored glow, and let it settle before taking Harry's Gryffindor tie from him and setting it carefully in the middle of the star. "It doesn't look like much," she said, frowning.

"It said we'd have to 'wait for the burning to finish' after the incantation," Draco said dryly, "And I don't know what means exactly, but I bet we're going to be getting more of a show."

"Should we cast the incantation together to make it stronger?" Luna offered.

Draco considered. "I think I should cast it, so we don't have to worry about not being in sync. But if you hold my hand, maybe I can draw some on your magic too."

"Draco!" Luna cried suddenly. "It's 11:59!"

"Don't panic," Draco said, and pressed a button on the nice watch Potter had given him that read out the seconds, if you pressed three times. Good for blood rituals *and* New Year's Eve parties.

"Listen. There it is. 43, 44..." He took out the vial of Harry's blood, unstoppering it carefully. Just as when he'd checked earlier that day, it hadn't seemed to spoil or dry. The strong smell of iron merged with the murky, filthy smell of the mud-like potion, and the earthy smell of the Forest all around to fill his nose, overwhelming him. "31, 30," he counted, and stepped carefully between two lines of the wheel, right outside the star. "28, 27..."

Luna stepped in another section beside him, and then asked, "Do you think this symbol has to do with the wheel of fate?"

"We can talk about this later, Luna..."

"Oh, sorry..."

"10, 9, 8..."

Luna seized Draco's hand after he unstoppered the blood. When the watch said 1, Draco felt like a whole New Year's worth of fireworks were going off in his head, there was that much light and sound and pressure embedded in the simple gesture of leaning forward, turning the vial upside down, and letting the blood drip out. But he did it, and it wasn't anything that noteworthy in the end. No sizzling flames shooting up yet, or demons crawling from the bowls of the underworld. Only an ugly lump of wet things that held the fate of Harry Potter in its star-shaped mess.

Draco drew his wand, took Luna's hand, and began the star-and-circle shaped wand motions. "Naufraga captivare. Naufraga captivare. Naufraga captivare-"

And they were in a sea of blue fire. If Draco had wondered what it looked like for Harry, passing through the flame of Protego Diabolica, it could have been like that. His vision went so white he thought he had passed out, before a flickering and a pulsation of heat haze made him realize it was just very bright flame.

He might have dropped Luna's hand, but her grip was so tight. He heard her gasp, but not scream, though *he* had screamed. At least the fire wasn't burning them. He could feel its fingers sliding through him, the way you could feel a ghost's body disappearing through you, except there was nothing slimy or cold to it. It felt like a lover's embrace, uninvited in the night. The flickering tendrils wrapped around his ankles, and the thought of them stroking over Luna's bare calves made him almost sick, but he told himself if anything was dangerous, the book would have said...

"Close your eyes," Draco called, "I feel like I'm going to go blind," and Luna made a sound of agreement. If you were supposed to stay silent during the flame, well, looked like he'd just fucked up the ritual. But he didn't want Luna's eyes burning out on this caressing ice-fire.

When the bright light turning his eyelids orange-red neon seemed to pulsate less brightly, long enough later that he and Luna had both soaked each other's palms in cold sweat, Draco opened his eyes. With the flames died down some, Draco could lean forward and see the shape of the burning potion and tie, crumbling together into a single mass of conflagration that would turn in time to ash.

And then Draco wished he hadn't opened his eyes, because from the crumbling black shape, a light was rising, a purer silver without the poison blue of the flames around it. The wisps of light danced around the circle, as if blown in their own separate wind, and then the flames were crowding on them, forcing them together in the form of a stag.

The stag writhed in its prison, trying to gallop away, the flames advancing on it like heads of the dragons in Fiendfyre. The stag bucked its head, hind legs convulsing, but it was driven down, at last until it was crouched over the black burning heap almost protectively, like some guardian sentinel about to be slain. And then the flames all fell upon it at once, and the stag seeped into the burning coals, illuminating them a brilliant silver.

Draco blinked hard against that brilliance. But it only took a moment longer for the flames to all turn silver in turn, then pure white, and then go out at the same time, leaving the only light blue again. The bluebell flames had stayed up high in their trees, looking down untouched.

They illuminated a thick, murky mass of charcoal-gray ash like quicksand, painted on the lighter brown dirt in the perfect shape of the star Luna had drawn.

"Draco? Can I open my eyes now? You let go of my hand."

"Sorry," Draco said, "Yeah, open them," and was pathetically grateful that Luna wouldn't have seen the stag. It had given him the feeling he was doing something wrong, not just in a moral sense but in a purer way, wrong as in against the laws of nature and magic, a perversion he had felt in the tongues of the flame. But hey, maybe that was the demon goddess Hecate's calling card.

"It's in a *star*!" Luna exclaimed, and clapped her hands together. "Oh, Draco, it means this part must have worked!"

"We're not done yet," Draco said wearily. "We have to take it, and any dirt that clings to it, and get the final potion brewing."

But compared to the ritual, he could have done the final bits of the potion in his sleep, especially when Luna was kind enough to go be the one to gather water from Hagrid's well to fill up the cauldron. They'd already turned the wings to powder and the quicksilver, and it wasn't long before Luna was dropping in the last three pomegranate seeds, one, two, three, and then Draco was turning on the flame.

The now-retired Gregorovitch responded fairly quickly to Theo's letter, even all the way from Germany. Maybe that was because he wanted nothing to do with it all. Knowing what Draco knew of the man's impending fate, Draco could only praise his misplaced optimism.

"It wasn't Grindelwald himself to bring the wand to him," Theo explained. "It was a beautiful young woman, with dark and wavy hair-"

"Good to know my Aunt Bella wasn't born yet," Draco quipped.

"Named Gretchen," Theo continued, "With threats of a benefactor behind her who would not take kindly to a refusal, despite the condition of the materials she presented him. Apparently when he first refused her, there was a fire in his shop that night. A fire that targeted only memorabilia from the shop bearing his name. Rather eloquent, as threats go, I think. The next morning, when she returned, he agreed to make the wands. Later, he would see this lovely young Miss Gretchen in the papers as an accomplice of Grindelwald during his rise to power."

"Hmm?" Draco yawned, enjoying the early spring weather as he lolled back across the courtyard grass. His indolence seemed to annoy Theo.

"I'm sorry, is this boring you?" Theo lowered his voice. "After what Periander said, I thought you understood how much was at stake for you in this. I'll try and keep it quick for you, then."

"I'm just tired," Draco said, yawning again. Naufragiam was virtually a fulltime job.

"He made four wands. The first was requested to be of elder wood, but when that proved ineffective, he made three more with different woods. She took each off in turn, and told him they had failed to respond whatsoever to her benefactor. It was the same for her, and for Gregorovitch. After the fourth was made, of walnut, there was no material left, so Gregorovitch suggested the core was simply too degraded to be functional, and suggested the wands be destroyed."

Draco struggled to rouse enthusiasm in himself. "But what, he lied to the intermediary and Grindelwald, and sent the wands to Ollivander instead?"

"No," Theo said, and prodded at his side with his foot. With difficulty, Draco roused himself to a sitting position. "*Grindelwald* insisted through his messenger that the wands not be destroyed. So Gregorovitch sent them off to Ollivander's father, rather than keep them himself, and have to possibly deal with that lot again. I don't think today's Ollivander ever realized it wasn't his father who made them. But I'll write again to Ollivander to confirm."

"And what, they all lay around for decades, until one happened into the hands of my charming aunt?"

"We only know of the wand responding to you and her," Theo theorized, "So there could be a commonality, obviously, of House Black blood- it seems to have more dramatic effects with you than her, but it's still two members of your house- if there was some relation to the initial incident of Astaroth-"

"I'm not interested in that," Draco groaned. "I don't care why it's me the wand chose. And I don't think it's the history. You're the one who wanted to look into it, but I've told you from the start, it's some ritual my aunt did that tainted it. Maybe the wand having this messed-up past just made it more rife for... I don't know, contamination. But that doesn't matter either. It's just a question of what's going to happen to me when I keep using it."

"*When* you keep using it," Theo echoed. "So you're just going to keep on with it."

Draco lay back down, earning a rare Hermione-like huff from Theo. He folded his hands behind his head and stared up at the sky, where some high breeze had the clouds virtually racing across the deep blue. "What choice do I have? If it's that or being a Squib..." He wondered how much Theo knew of the Dark Lord's plans on the horizon. If it was like the blue loop, little or none. Theo had so often preferred books to people, especially if those people carried news of a reality he thought he could safely insulate himself from.

"If you hadn't burned the bridge with Periander... but that's done. So we'll write to Ollivander," Theo persisted, "And look more into rituals your aunt might..."

"I don't have the time right now," Draco sighed. "I think we've hit a dead end. But I'll try and do some more research over the summer..."

"You had your flying sessions taken away," Theo said suspiciously. "What has you so busy now? Is it helping Potter with the Triwizard Tournament?"

It was annoying to have to admit the dueling lessons, but preferable to suspicion about, say, secret potions, so Draco explained their lessons to Theo, who could not have been more unimpressed. He kept nagging to the point where Draco called him a Hufflepuff, at which point Theo lay down beside Draco to fix those sharp blue eyes on him, full of unusual disquiet.

"You're the one who's not acting like a Slytherin," Theo insisted. "What are your priorities, Draco? *Anything* could happen to you, but what, Potter's more important than that?" Draco shrugged laconically. "Salazar, Draco. Self-sacrifice doesn't suit you. Martyrdom, as a *Malfoy*-"

"It's not that," Draco said, irritated into full awareness. "I'm not trying to be noble. I really just don't care."

"You don't care what happens to you?"

"I *don't*, Theo. I... don't... *care*. Is that clear enough for you?"

"You asked for my help, though," Theo persisted. "You did want to try and fix this before-"

"But maybe there *is* no fixing it," Draco said calmly. The concern was gratifying, but it felt like Theo was speaking to him from across a divide, some fissure that was only cracking wider. "If my wand has doomed me, Theo, well, I was doomed already."

"So dramatic. And what if it makes you hurt someone *else*?"

"I know to be careful," Draco said defensively. "I wouldn't let it. I'd take myself out of the equation before that ever happened. You can keep the Grindelwald book, if that's what-"

"Draco," Theo said, and grabbed him by the wrist. Draco shook him off, meeting his gaze with a cold feeling in his gut, like the winter was reversing and coming back. And it wasn't just an illusion. The wind had picked up. "You've got people who depend on you, don't you? Your cousin, the Gryffindors- your *godfather*-"

"And that," Draco said, pouncing on his words, "Is *why* I can't lose my magic. So I can be of use to them. Even if I could change the talon wand for another, I wouldn't, because it makes me more *powerful*, Theo, don't you get that? I know what it's like to be powerless. I'm not going there again." He could hear the intensity in his voice, and fought to pull it back. It helped keep Theo's sense and thoughtfulness and blue eyes far away.

"My father told me once," Theo said, not backing down, "That when wielded incorrectly, having power is *worse* than being powerless."

"What do you think I'm going to do, Theo?" Draco scoffed. "Go mad and murder you in my sleep?"

"I'm not scared *of* you. I'm scared *for* you. Just be careful," Theo said finally, getting up. His frame blocked the chill of the wind, for that moment. "Be careful, Draco. That's all I ask. Just- just remember that there will always be things you don't know."

"Okay," Draco said, throat tight, and Theo nodded, before walking away and leaving him to the full force of the wind again.

Manibipiscatus

Chapter Notes

Playlist

Naufragiam carried on, as did the Wolfsbane, both with apparent success, while investigation with Theo fell by the wayside. The success of Draco's other major new extracurricular endeavor, the dueling lessons, was more up for debate. Harry certainly seemed to look forward to them, and would tell any of his friends who'd listen how amazing they were. And Draco had legitimately worked on trying to make them useful, outside of as a blood-stealing pretext. He'd consulted with the textbook, Sirius, Remus, Hermione, and on one occasion even attempted to with Severus, before a sallow hand went up and Severus intoned, "You can hardly *imagine* my lack of interest in what you and the Potter boy get up to at night."

Harry was learning the spells that Draco had set out for him, in the modified sort of expedited curriculum that revolved around Draco's own abilities. And Harry already had some basics like Stupefy down, and of course his beloved Expelliarmus. As a whole, Draco had picked out spells that he'd found useful in duels, apart from the dark arts ones. He'd imposed a strict no-dark magic rule on the lessons after what had happened with the Protego Diabolica, which had convinced him Harry could be trusted around dark magic much less than Draco's little third-year cousin.

Draco had written up a rough program and given it to Harry to proudly display in the Gryffindor fourth-year dorm, altered as it went along by current progress and Harry's current demands. After the first session, they ended each session with a sparring duel.

Dueling Lessons for the Chosen Blunderbus (Salazar save us all)

☒1: Shielding: Protego, Protego horribilis, Fianto duri

☒2: Ocular Shielding: Fumos, Nebulus, Lumos maxima

☒3: Oppugno, Uses of

☒4: Review

☒5: Pressure: Depulso, Everte statum, Diffindo

☒6: Water: Aqua eructo, Aqua eructo duo, Glacius, Incendio glacius

☒7: Wind: Ventus, Ventus duo, Deprimo

☒8: Review

☒9: Advanced: Ventus tria

☒10: Blasting: Finestra, Expulso, Reducto, Bombarda, Bombarda maxima, Confringo

☐11: Binding: Locomotor mortis, Petrificus totalus, Incarcerous, Carpe retractum, Manibipiscatus

☐12: Review

☐12: Advanced: Baubillious

☐13: Advanced: Lacarnum inflamari

Harry made disconcertingly quick process, with no spell he couldn't pick up in a single session, though some like Ventus tria took a while to get anywhere close to full strength. And it took him longer applying any of them in practice duels, of which Draco was smug to note, Draco had won every single one. But Harry seemed as motivated as he had ever been about anything, even Quidditch. Small wonder, since what he most wanted to learn, throwing fireballs, Draco had placed at the very end.

Draco didn't have such a good feeling about Session 11, the one that had been in slot 5, but he'd switched it with the original slot 11, Pressure, for the whole blood collection enterprise. More defensive acts like binding should have gone earlier in the curriculum, but in truth, Draco had only been too happy to put them off. He had a dim feeling as soon as he wrote them on the list that they could be trouble, and got a more concrete feeling of that when he went an hour early to the Room of Requirement. As he conjured up mats and pillows to cover the hard floor, in anticipation of being thrown there by Harry's magic to bind him down, he could see the difficulty there on his own end.

He made sure to engage quickly in his bad habit, before there was any chance of Harry showing up, though it felt wrong doing it in the Room of Requirement of all places. But at least it should save him from greater embarrassment in front of Harry. He didn't want to think it would excite him to have Harry tie him down, but even as he dismissed the idea, there was a swell of heat in his recently-sated body that marked him as a lamentably bad liar to himself.

It all went wrong from the start, as Harry showed up in Muggle clothes for the first time since the start. "Harry, what are you wearing?" Draco barked. He might have told Harry to go back and change, if he hadn't already turned the hourglass over per policy.

"It says on your sheet that we're doing binding charms," Harry said, as if his logic was apparent. "So I didn't want to get any nice clothes messed up by hitting the floor over and over." He gestured to his worn gray hoodie and tight, ripped fading blue jeans, which indeed could very well be the oldest clothes he owned. They could have evoked a peasant living in squalor, if it hadn't been Harry Potter beneath them. "I didn't realize you'd put down- oh, God, all this, erm, carpet and stuff, and *pillows*... it's like it's all a huge bed..."

"Harry," Draco said slowly. "I *know* how to do the spells on that list. In your experience of the sessions, who has been the one learning the spells? And who has been the one casting them on whom?" He gestured from Harry, then to himself. "Do you think I would have conjured so much padding if *you* were to be the one doing the falling?"

"Oh!" Harry said, actually drawing his wand right away in excitement. He bit his lip, green eyes very big above it, as he rolled up the sleeves of his hoodie and advanced on Draco. "You mean I'm going to be binding *you*?" Draco nodded, telling himself he would not let Harry make him lose his composure, especially since he wasn't even trying. "No, I just- I guess I just assumed I'd be practicing getting out of it. I never thought that *you* would actually, um, let me tie *you* down..."

It was hard to miss the frisson Harry seemed to find in the idea. Draco refused to acknowledge one in himself, despite his earlier actions that night. It was one thing to enjoy tying someone down. That was natural, in a way. Power felt good, there was no denying it, sexually or not. But to enjoy *being* tied down? Draco wouldn't like that. Especially not with Harry.

"Never let it be said," Draco intoned, "That I have become predictable. No fear, Harry, I will also be teaching you counter-spells. Shall we proceed?"

"Yes!" Harry yelled, then winced a bit at his excessive volume. "No, I just..." He took on the worst fake-innocent look in the world. "I'm very interested to learn the intricacies of these spells for dueling purposes," he said, as earnestly as he could.

Bloody hell. Draco had been the one who did this curriculum. Yes, they were objectively important, but for self-preservation, couldn't he have just left them out entirely?

"Okay," Draco said. "We start with Locomotor mortis..."

Harry protested that he'd been able to do the Leg Bind and Full-Body Bind since first year, but Draco made him demonstrate both on him before he would let him move on. And thankfully, there was little excitement for Draco in those spells. He hoped he had been wary for nothing. Except then, with permission, Harry shot his first Incarcerous at him. Draco let himself be caught, and the ropes wrapped around Draco's waiting wrists with all the scorched-sharp spark of magic that only Potter's seemed to carry...

"Draco? Are you okay?" Harry asked, bending over where his spell had sent Draco falling bound at his feet. Draco struggled to sit up, flexing his wrists inside his binds, then managed to turn his hands and squirm out of them.

"I am now, Harry," Draco said, rolling his eyes. "What was that? You only did my wrists, and they weren't even very tight. Are you trying to let your opponent escape and murder you?"

"No, I just..." Harry rubbed the back of his head. "I don't want to hurt you."

"Harry," Draco said disbelievingly. "Three sessions ago, you were shooting *tornados* at me. And now you're freaking out over a bit of *rope*?"

Harry was flushed already, shifting nervously from foot to foot. It made the muscle of his thighs slide visibly under the rip in his jeans. Draco tried not to stare or let his eyes travel higher. "I don't know, it just seems... different. More... personal, or..."

"Harry," Draco said coldly, "You're fourteen, not four. You can handle binding a bloke a little without losing your nerve like this. Now stop acting like a Hufflepuff and tie me up properly."

Oh, Merlin, did Draco wish he had not taken that tone with Harry, or used that final combination of words. "Incarcerous," Harry said again more intently. This time, the ropes that shot out of his wand got Draco's wrists *and* his ankles, and tighter. "Is that better?"

"You can manipulate them with your mind, even once they've been secured," Draco said a bit breathlessly, trying to ignore how interesting the pressure of the ropes felt. "It's all visualization. They're *your* ropes. If you want them to loosen or tighten, hold up your wand, picture it, and you can make them do it. You can make them grow or shrink or wrap around other... places... *Harry*..."

Draco shivered as he felt the rope binding his ankles pull wider, parting them. It was enough for individual coils of rope to begin winding over and over up his calves, trapping his legs more and more, loose before tightening in place each in turn. Harry was concentrating to do it, but the slowness of their progression made it monstrously teasing. This was dueling practice to Harry, but for Draco, it was touch, a demanding, constrictive touch of Harry's power where he couldn't let Harry's *hands* ever touch...

"Alright, Harry, that's enough," Draco gasped. "Give me my wand, loosen one of my wrists a bit. Watch." Harry handed him the talon wand from his pocket, right wrist bonds relaxing, and Draco cast Relashio. Harry looked almost regretful as the ropes dropped away limp and harmless, especially after Draco tossed the mass of coils away.

"Just for once," Harry said with a rueful laugh, "I had you as a captive audience, didn't I?"

"And you will again," Draco said, "Tonight. Do it again."

Harry seemed good enough at Incarcerous already. He said he thought he had done it before once or twice, though he couldn't remember when. But he also said he remembered it seeming different when Sirius and Remus did it, more powerful somehow. "It involves the neck the way they do that," Draco said warily. Three different times of Harry casting Incarcerous on his arms and legs, experimenting with moving the rope, had left Draco already longing to be accidentally knocked out or something. "Release me first and I'll tell you, alright?"

"Okay, sorry," said Harry, looking reluctant to each time, and tried, "Relashio." Like most spells seemed to for Harry, as soon as he got the wand movement down, it did its job right away. "So they have the rope around the neck too? Why? Isn't that dangerous?"

"I'd imagine it has to do with them and their friends being Animagi and werewolves. Animals and such like that with sharp jaws can attack with their faces more than humans." He frowned

when he caught Harry looking down at him mischievously, before Harry had bent down and poked him in the lips.

"Then I'd better bind *your* neck," Harry teased, "Since with dragons, fire comes out of the mouth..." Draco had the most terrible image of licking Harry's fingers, sucking them in not letting them go, telling him *yes, if you want, put your rope around my neck,* whatever *you want*...

"Try it if you want," Draco said, affecting to be unimpressed, "But be very careful. Think about what my godfather would do to you if I died in a freak *rope bondage* accident."

Salazar, was it dumb to put it that way. It was the most overt reference Draco had made to the possibly sexual dimension of this exercise. He didn't even know if Harry knew all that could be involved there. But come to think of it, in one summer of talking to Sirius on the mirror, Harry had gone from seemingly clueless to accepting his bisexuality, presumably in part from his new godfather's example. Sirius could have told Harry anything, to prepare for the worst- or best, depending on your perspective. And there was another suspicion, about the neck dimension of the charm for Remus and Sirius, that Draco would definitely never be voicing to Harry bloody Potter.

This was Saint Potter, do-gooder, Gryffindor supreme, savior of the wizarding world, starry-eyed proponent of all that was good and pure and true. He would never draw an ounce of pleasure, let alone sexual pleasure, from playing with ropes, or squeezing on another boy's neck...

"Ah..." Draco gasped, breathless moan surprised out of him as Harry's next spell hit and the ropes reached his neck right away. They circled it with intent. And this close to Draco's face, he could feel the current of Harry's power through them all the more clearly, like there was an excess energy there that Harry had to hold back from squeezing down. When he tried to crane his neck up to see Harry, to try and tell from his face whether he hated or loved this, it constricted his own air. He moaned again, head falling back *caught*. The blood was pumping rapidly in his veins, rushing downwards, pressure and warmth in his lower body catching there again at raw sensation- and that was more than enough of Incarcerous for one day.

If Draco had thought Carpe retractum would be easier to withstand- well, he would have been right, but not by much, as Harry took a long time swinging ropes at Draco before he succeeded in catching one. Then he demanded the opportunity to drag Draco across the floor, back and forth, over and over, by one or two wrists or ankles, and once or twice the thigh or throat or all around his waist, claiming not to have the hang of it. Like hell he didn't. Draco was going to have rope burns on both his wrists and ankles after this, red marks he would have to hide.

He worried he wouldn't have the will to enchant them away. He had the excuse to be breathless from all the dragging and manhandling, but he couldn't deny the wicked thoughts it put in him. They circled through every time he arrived helpless at Harry's feet, rope often coming from Harry's direction to encircle not just one or two limbs but all of them. They'd leave Draco bound there, before he barked at Harry enough to make him loosen them. Every time, he couldn't help but imagine, in another world, what Harry could be dragging him to his feet in order to do to him...

Draco was grateful to look over and see the hourglass nearly empty, which meant an end to ropes. "Harry, as fascinating as this no doubt is on *your* end, there is one more spell I wanted to teach if you feel up to it..."

"Yeah. Relashio." Harry helped Draco up. He gasped when Harry's fingers brushed the rope burn on his wrist. Harry didn't seem to notice, just gripping his hand hard before letting him go.

Manibipiscatus should be a nice benign cooldown. Draco shrugged off his rumpled robes and sweater once finally rope-free, and then his Slytherin tie, collapsing onto his back. "Okay, I don't think I need to stand up for this. Merlin, you've killed me. We're not going to have time for a duel tonight, you know. Either *the* Harry Potter is inept with ropes, or he likes them too much..."

Harry crouched down, staring at him uncertainly. He pushed up his glasses and peered closer once Draco rolled up his sleeves. "Look at that..." he breathed, staring at his wrists in fascination without challenging either of Draco's statements. "Look at what I did... I'm sorry, Draco..."

He did not sound in the least bit sorry. "Manibipiscatus is exactly what it sounds like," Draco informed him, only to get a blank look. "Oh, for Salazar's sake, you Muggle-raised lot really don't learn your Latinate roots, do you? Hands are *manibus.* Fishing is *piscatus.* It's the idea of catching someone's wrists in an invisible net. Ensnaring them in a trap. It's like the leg bind, only for wrists." Draco had picked it up watching Severus do it to Karkaroff. It might well be Severus's invention, and dark magic to boot. But anything to avoid spending the entire session on ropes.

Draco conjured a dummy and did it to it a couple times to show Harry. Then he Vanished the dummy, remaining sitting up throughout on his pile of soft green pillows. He made sure his wrists were exposed, sleeves still up, and turned them forwards to show Harry. "If you do it right, I should be pushed onto my back, and my arms should be pinned above my head. Like this," Draco said, leaning back, and stretched his arms high above his head, pushing his wrists together.

There was no response from Harry. Draco waited for a couple seconds, then sat back up, making sure his hair was securely out of the way. The S clasp seemed to have held up even under all of Harry's attentions- *no, Draco, do not think what* else *its enchantment could hold up under the stress of-* but the same could not be said for Harry. He was just staring down at Draco with his lips parted and his eyes very wide, pupils dilating and turning them darker behind his thick eyelashes.

"Harry?" Draco prompted. "Do you think you're ready to try it? Manibipiscatus?"

"Yeah," Harry said, voice an octave lower and twice as heavy as before, but he repeated the incantation with credible pronunciation. Then he lifted his wand and called, "Manibipiscatus!" in his strongest voice.

Draco's wrists were seized by invisible hands and slammed behind his head with such force, his body rebounded against the pillows, bouncing backwards, his back arching. He gasped

and Harry leaned right over him, staring at his work, leaning so close to Draco's wrists that Draco could feel his breath on them. "Did it work?" Harry asked, feeling at the wrists. His hands slid tightly around each of them, trying to lift them only to find he couldn't either.

"Strong spell," Draco said, in the most normal voice he could muster. "Especially... if it's you casting it... because you're Harry Potter..."

"Shut up," Harry laughed, staring down at him with a great deal of fiendish brightness in his darkened, blown-out green eyes. "You need to stop saying that. That doesn't do anything to make me special, except for what other people say about me..."

"I don't mean because you're *the* famous Harry Potter, Boy Who Lived," Draco whined, struggling against the invisible bonds. Especially once Harry had sat atop his legs, keeping them down as well so Draco couldn't try to squirm away with them. "Don't be mad. You know that's not... that's not... what I see in you..."

"What do you," Harry whispered, gulping hard, "See in me," and flattened his hands over Draco's trapped wrists. He looked like he would take advantage of this position to make sure he got a straight answer. Draco could smell that fatal Amortentia scent all over him, cheap shampoo, magic, sweat, the scent of pure desire, pure danger. *The dragon,* Draco told himself, *The stag*, but he forgot for a moment *how* those things combined, at the thought of how that would feel, the combination...

"Power," Draco said without thinking, the most honest answer, and Harry inhaled sharply. "Your spell was strong- powerful, because- because *you're* powerful. That's... that's all," he breathed out hard, and licked his dry lips nervously. Harry's eyes fixed on Draco's mouth then, and Draco's gut clenched, reading the thought in Harry's eyes, the exact shape and feel of Harry's desire.

"Not like you," Harry said with a forced laugh, left thumb stroking softly over the pulse point of Draco's wand hand.

"Yeah," Draco agreed. "Not like me. *More* power. I can feel it, you know, in your spells... in the way they feel in the air... in the way *you* smell..." Draco was rambling. He didn't even know what he was saying anymore. "It's kind of- harsh and acrid, it tastes like charcoal and fireworks- it's in your scent, you have so much *power* in you waiting to get out... no one's ever told you that? You're like a supernova waiting to happen. Oh, you know what that means, Harry, you did take a couple years of Astronomy. Yes, you do, you smell like a supernova..."

"Um." Harry licked his own lips, staring at Draco's still, eyes half-lidded, intent written over every inch of him. "Is that... is that a good thing, Draco?"

"No," Draco lied, and closed his eyes. "Now let me up, Harry, your lesson's over."

It was in the last week of May that Harry found out what the Third Task would be from Mr. Bagman. Naturally, he rejoiced to hear the news, as he thought the dueling lessons he'd been

holding with Draco were perfect practice for the spell bits. A hedge maze, full of various small tasks to overcome, including creatures... not that different from, you know, an obstacle course full of various dark creatures, which had been the third-year Defense exam last year with Lupin. Some of the creatures would probably even overlap. Almost as if... *Dumbledore had planned it that way?*

No, Draco's suspicions of Dumbledore, justified or not, were definitely not productive right now. Even if he still thought Dumbledore could have been the one to put Harry's name in the Goblet of Fire. Or at least turned a blind eye and let Crouch do it.

The greater snag in the Third Task reveal, Harry told them, had been when Krum pulled him aside after and taken him rather ominously to the Forbidden Forest. Once there, hilariously enough, he had confronted Harry about whether there was something between him and Hermione. Apparently, even without Skeeter writing articles this time around about Harry and Hermione's torrid affair and love triangle, it had been wounding enough to Krum's pride for her to cheer so much more for him than Harry in the third task. Not to mention that she had barely given him the time of day since then, in part, she'd confided to Draco, because his invitation to come visit him in the summer had freaked her out.

So Harry of all people was suspected as the Lothario who had cruelly wrested Viktor's lady love from him. And then Crouch showed up all barmy and ranting, accosting them demanding to see Dumbledore, only to disappear before he could. Draco's friends were all concerned and suspicious about it, but Draco knew full well what he was on about, and he'd almost given the game away. In any event, it was karma for attempting the arrest of the incredibly harmless and innocent young bastion of virtue known as Draco Malfoy.

The Krum issue had more immediate consequences, as Harry's denials seemed to turn Krum's suspicions in a different direction. The next day, when Hermione and Draco met up in Myrtle's bathroom after dinner, the door was kicked open right after by a very tall, very infuriated Bulgarian. "I have caught you in the act!"

"Oh, hell," Draco hissed, and looked reflexively towards the toilet stall where they kept their cauldron hidden. But Krum didn't catch his stare. He only had eyes for Hermione. "Viktor, this isn't what it looks like..."

"This is *exactly* vat it looks like!" Krum exclaimed. Though he hadn't drawn his wand, he had a tone like he had. *How angry would Hermione be if I Obliviated her boyfriend?* "I thought you vere my friend, Malfoy! But you have stolen Hermione avay from me!"

"Hey, Viktor, we *are* friends- well, um, friendly acquaintances- wait, *what*?"

Hermione had been looking scared of expulsion, but then she just looked baffled. "Viktor, what do you mean, *stolen* me? You mean he's taking up too much of my time recently? I know we haven't been able to spend that much time together, I'm sorry, but I've been really busy..."

"Time vith *him*!" Krum yelled. "I have seen you sneaking off on secret rendezvous! You meet in this bathroom to *do* things! He is your lover, Hermione! Verräter! Verräterin! Ihr zwei seid Schweine! *Schweine*!"

Okay, Draco hadn't followed all the German there, but what he had did not sound promising. "Hey, Viktor, calm down, you do remember I'm gay, right? Sehr Schwul-"

"It is lies!" Krum yelled, throwing his hands up. "I should have known ven you stopped our flying together!"

"Hey, no, that's, like, a total misunderstanding," Draco protested. "Seriously, Viktor, you've got it all wrong. I got my flying permission taken away by Professor Snape-"

"Ha! A likely story!" Krum exclaimed bitterly. "Your godfather spoils you, Malfoy. He vould do anything for you. Vat could you have possibly done for him to punish you that badly?"

Threaten and curse your headmaster. "Erm, well, it wasn't a big deal..."

"Liar! He is a liar! Hermione, vat does he have that I do not?" Krum asked earnestly, eyes shining big and wide with betrayal. "Is it that he is the Heir of Slytherin?"

"Oh, for Salazar's sake," Draco groaned. Hermione glanced nervously in the direction of their potion, which was rather fragrant. Draco weighed up the options, and decided to cut their losses. "Okay, fine, you're right, Viktor. We're in love." He rolled his eyes at Hermione's indignant screech. "Striker, it's not like you like him. You don't even really want to date him, do you?"

Hermione's silence told the whole story there. "I knew it!" Krum cried out, voice agonized.

"Yeah," Draco said, trying to put an arm around Hermione's shoulders, which she immediately shoved off, looking red-faced and miserable. He flicked the H on her bracelet before carrying on. "See, you've caught me. I just put on the whole gay thing to cover up that I'm in love with a Muggleborn- my father would never accept our love- we come here every night to consummate our wanton passion-"

He might just have gotten away with it, however murderous Hermione was starting to look, if Myrtle hadn't chosen that moment to insert her two undead cents. "That's not what *I* heard," she simpered. "Oh, hello, who are *you*?" she squealed at the sight of Krum. "Did that awful bushy-haired girl break your heart, big boy? If you're ever lonely..."

"Vat do you mean, spirit?" Krum asked, eyes narrowing. "You say Malfoy is lying?"

"Myrtle," Draco yelled. "If you rat us out, I'll never let you watch me naked during my angel's infusion again!"

Krum looked baffled. "Vat kind of depraved sex parties have you been having in here?"

"I'm sorry, Draco," Myrtle said dramatically, "But the heart wants what it wants." She soared over to Krum, stroked a ghostly hand over the musculature of his shoulder, and delivered rather bluntly, "Draco's gay. Harry Potter fancies him, they took a steamy bath together." Hermione got a pole-axed look, but it was erased by indignation when Myrtle added, "And Draco's been a busy boy, you know... he and Hermione have been coming here to brew an *illegal secret potion*. I'll show you! It's very illegal, and very secret, it's right in this stall..."

"*Frankenstein*! I'm going to be *expelled* because you trusted *Moaning Myrtle*!" Hermione shrieked right in his ear. Draco tried to convey with his eyes that he was ready, willing, and able to Obliviate, if not more drastic action.

Krum pulled open the door Myrtle indicated, and stared down at the bubbling Wolfsbane, with its various incriminating-looking ingredients scattered around it. "Oh," he said slowly. "Then vat are you making? Is this dark magic? Is he forcing you to help him, Hermione?"

"No!" Hermione yelled, looking on the verge of hysterics at no one listening to her.

"Then vat is it?" Krum asked suspiciously.

"Viktor," Draco said with a sigh, "Don't you think you've done enough, barging in here falsely accusing us and bullying a girl like this? If she doesn't like you, she doesn't like you. Get the message and leave her alone already."

Krum's eyes widened with horror. "Hermione," he whispered. "Is this true? Do you not return my feelings for you? There is someone else? Is it that *Veasley*?"

"No, Viktor, I'm not seeing anyone else," Hermione sighed, and grabbed Draco's hand and squeezed it for courage. "I just... I'm really sorry, Viktor, you're a very nice person, and I really did enjoy going to the Yule Ball with you, it's just... I don't really know if we have very much in common, so I don't think we're very well-suited for each other..."

"You are breaking it off vith me?" Krum asked in disbelief. "In front of *Malfoy*?"

Hermione reluctantly let go of Draco's hand. "You're right. Draco, I think you should go. Viktor and I have things we should discuss, with just us, *Myrtle*."

Myrtle looked up innocently from stroking Krum's back. "What?"

"But I haven't even gotten the chance to threaten him yet," Draco whined. "You know, about if he tells anyone about our potion, or if he doesn't leave you alone if that's what you want..."

"Draco," Hermione said, with a resolute sigh, "I can handle this myself."

"Okay, fine," Draco sighed, and squeezed her hand a last time. "And you'll, ah, check on the, uh, *you know* before you go?"

"I vill not let Hermione go anywhere," Krum said very glumly, "Vithout her vorking on your secret evil potion." And Draco left Hermione to it.

Krum was as good as his word after that. The Wolfsbane was unhurt, Hermione was freed of her unwanted admirer, and word never spread of their actions in Myrtle's bathroom. Draco was almost sad, as he'd mentally prepared all variety of creative threats. Not against Krum himself, who he rather liked as a person, but against his loathsome headmaster. Draco would have been glad to follow through with any threats on Karkaroff.

They were more careful watching the Marauder's Map after, and no one caught them after Krum. The only real casualty was Hermione's mood, as she spent the next several days quiet

and guilty, whatever the ways Draco and Luna tried alternately flattering her and alarming her to cheer her up. "If she keeps being this sad," Luna said to him after, "We should tell her about the Naufragiam potion. She'd be so upset she'd forget all about that Viktor Krum."

Luna, it seemed, had not quite understood the scale of what was at stake.

But Hermione eventually was alarmed enough to distract her from her first break-up. Harry provided the fuel on a late Monday afternoon. When Draco and Hermione emerged together from Double Arithmancy, just before dinnertime, Ron and Luna were waiting there looking deadly anxious. "How bloody long can you study *numbers* for!" Ron exclaimed in agitation.

"I'm so pleased I didn't choose Arithmancy as an elective," Luna agreed. "We've been listening for ten minutes, waiting for it to be over, and I feel we've aged years."

"What is it? What's going on?" Hermione asked, then looked between the four of them and asked, "Where's Harry? Is something wrong with him?"

"Had a fit in Divination today," Ron said with a shudder. Draco hadn't had anything special down for this date in his notebooks, but this could have happened in the blue loop. He might just not have heard about it. But it still chilled his blood, thinking of the last time *he* had been in the Divination Tower before his lifetime ban. "He started rolling on the floor, clutching his scar. Trelawney thought it must have been a prophetic dream or something, but he said he didn't see anything, and she couldn't make him stay. He said he was going to the hospital wing, but I went there after class and he wasn't there. Madam Pomfrey said she never saw him..."

"Draco, Hermione, do you still have the map?" Luna asked. Draco pulled them into an empty corridor and activated it. Ron grabbed the map and searched it anxiously, and what he found didn't help any of their anxiety.

"Dumbledore's office," Hermione breathed. "So he didn't just see nothing."

"Do you think he's in trouble?" Ron said fearfully.

"I want to know what he saw," Luna said excitedly. "Let's go wait outside!"

Hermione looked torn between fear of being caught and her own curiosity, but eventually, three outvoted one and they all went sneaking towards Dumbledore's office. The map said Harry was inside, but Dumbledore not, so Draco knocked on the door. There was no reply.

"Should we just go in?" Ron hissed. "What if he's in there having another fit and swallowing his own tongue or something?"

"Dumbledore shouldn't have left him alone," Hermione fretted. Draco deactivated the map and put it away with a sigh.

"It's probably some sort of Chosen One thing going on that we're not supposed to know about," Draco said crossly. "I don't know if we should storm the office, Dumbledore could be back any moment..."

"It gives me a bad feeling," Luna said quietly, "Him having a fit like that so close to the Third Task..." She exchanged a knowing glance with Draco, having heard the suspicions behind his decision to brew Naufragiam. "Like something is going to happen..."

"Draco, you think Karkaroff is up to something, don't you?" Hermione mused.

"I don't know anything for sure," Draco sighed, closing his eyes. "But Harry had better tell *us* everything he saw in that dream when he's done here-"

"Knowing Harry," a kindly voice said from behind them, "I have no doubt he will."

"Professor Dumbledore!" Hermione exclaimed, looking mortified. "We were- we were just-"

Dumbledore sent them packing then, gently but firmly. He promised Harry was in no immediate danger, that he would send him back to them soon, and that he wouldn't forbid Harry from telling them anything they talked about. So they stopped in the dungeons, getting enough food from a worried Dobby to feed an army. They decided to wait to eat it with Harry once he got back. Even if Ron stole a few rolls on the way up the moving staircases.

"Stalwart honor," Hermione said, and the Fat Lady opened for them. "We can wait for him in the common room, he'll probably come right-"

"INTRUDER! INTRUDER!" the Fat Lady began to shriek the moment Draco crossed the threshold. A loud angry klaxon began to sound overheard, twice as intense as the one for boys in the girls' dorms. "INTRUDER ALERT! INTRUDER ALERT! DANGEROUS INDIVIDUAL! DANGEROUS INDIVIDUAL IN GRYFFINDOR TOWER! INTRUDER ALERT!"

"Oh, fuck," Draco breathed, turning red under all the incredulous stares he was getting from glaring Gryffindors by the fire, and raced back out. He saw Fred and George covering their ears but smirking at him mightily before he cleared the Fat Lady. The klaxons stopped once he was out, but not the painting. "I'm sorry!" he yelled up at her. "I forgot! I didn't realize the ban was that serious! I left, okay, I won't go back in, will you please stop yelling?"

"INTRUDER ALERT!" she bellowed on just as majestically, taking on operatic notes at her top volume. "CHAOS AND DISORDER! MADNESS IN GRYFFINDOR TOWER!"

Apparently McGonagall had been alerted in her office. She had to come up and tell the Fat Lady to stop screaming, which couldn't have made Draco many more friends in Gryffindor. She found him sitting glumly on the top stair step, munching on a sandwich that Hermione had snuck out to him. He sat there waiting for the worst while McGonagall expertly coaxed the Fat Lady into quiet, and then she had looked down at Draco and said, "Mr. Malfoy. Would you care to explain?"

Draco turned to stare up at her. He tried to look as small and pathetic as possible, but that was getting harder for a boy almost a fifth year by now. "It was a mistake, Professor. I completely forgot I was banned from Gryffindor... we were all worried, see, because Harry had a fit in class..."

And the news seemed to take McGonagall's focus off Draco and onto worrying about one of her favorite pupils. She set off, probably to grill Dumbledore, taking only a mere ten points off Slytherin. But he was sent back to the dungeons, with Severus in rare vicious form at the news Draco had been caught sneaking into Gryffindor.

He had to wait until the next morning to be filled in, with June dawning bright outside but uncertain within the walls of Hogwarts, the shadow of more than just Harry's dream coming over them now. He knew something was awry when Hermione took him aside to tell him the whole story instead of Harry. He felt like being sick when she narrated Harry's dream about Wormtail and Voldemort, which she had copied down an account of in writing much like he would have. It was nothing new, but it confirmed that the same plan as the blue loop must be in play, unless Draco's magic prevented it. It also confirmed how foolish he had been not to kill Wormtail when he had the chance, though Hermione did not seem overly fond of listening to him express that opinion.

But Hermione's solicitude had not been over the Wormtail question, but some of the things Harry found out after, having snuck a look into Dumbledore's Pensieve when alone in his office because of course he had. For one, he had seen Bagman, an ex-Quidditch star, brought up on charges of passing information. And he had seen four Death Eaters brought in on another occasion, which made Draco pale to hear, knowing Harry would have heard about Draco's wand: Harry hadn't said it to Hermione, but Draco knew those four individuals must have been called up for judgment for the torture of Frank and Alice Longbottom.

By their description, Draco could instantly identify three as Uncle Rodolphus, his brother Rabastan, and of course Aunt Bella, who had yelled out in court that they were faithful to the Dark Lord and would be rewarded for it. The identity of the fourth one, a teenager, had been revealed by his pathetic pleas for mercy to a sobbing mother, and a vengeful prosecutor who was also his father, who sent to Azkaban for life with the lot of them. *Oh, Gryffindors, if only you knew these criminal courts are like a who's who of your Defense professors.*

But the first thing Harry had seen, which Hermione left until last, was the trial before the Wizengamot of another Death Eater, Igor Karkaroff. She said it had begun this sequence, with the implication Karkaroff had been the one to turn in the Death Eaters whose trials subsequently followed. But she had told it backwards, because Dumbledore's first memory with Karkaroff, naming names to save himself, had been too many for Harry to remember, except for one he could never have forgotten... Severus Snape.

Apparently Dumbledore had said Severus was a Death Eater who had turned sides before Voldemort fell, and had been a spy subsequently. That wasn't news to Draco, but it had been to the others. And Harry must have questioned it to Dumbledore, because Hermione said Dumbledore had repeated the same assertion of his faith in Severus to Harry that afternoon.

"Wait, did he ask you to talk to me about this?" Draco snapped, feeling the hideous déjà vu of old fissures he thought sanded over coming to crack again. "What is this? 'Hey, guess what, Draco, your godfather's a Death Eater'? What, do you think I didn't *know*?"

"He said you'd told him once that Professor Snape *hadn't* been," Hermione said, shifting in a way that made Draco feel bad she'd been enlisted as messenger. He shouldn't unload his frustrations on her. She'd been getting it hard enough recently. He couldn't let himself fall into

taking her for granted. Since apparently one of the most basic things he'd taken for granted, that his friends no longer suspected Severus of every remotely dark occurrence, was not true after all.

By the time Draco arrived at the dueling lesson, he had worked up such a head of steam that he wished it wasn't a review day. He wished they were on to Baubillious, and he could spend the session shooting lightning bolts at that lightning scar to his heart's content, however much it was *hurting.* If Harry showed any signs of blaming that pain on Draco's godfather, well, Draco might just have to cast Protego Diabolica again, and see if he passed through it unscathed this time-

Harry was waiting inside, with an exhausted look in wake of the day's misadventures that did nothing to make Draco feel more merciful. He brightened when he saw Draco come in, only for his face to drop at Draco's expression. At least he was dressed properly today, but that was the best that could be said of him. He'd been seated in the chair behind the repaired cage, but he came out with a maddening pity on his face.

"Get in the cage," Draco snapped, wishing he'd gotten more useful advice from Sirius about anger than *turn it to vengeance.* He couldn't wreak vengeance against Harry Potter. Though it wasn't like there hadn't been enough small squabbles and slights in just the red line for it to feel justified. Harry would be just as justified to seek the same against Draco. Well, *let him try.*

Harry hadn't moved. "Get in the fucking cage!" Draco barked. "I can't be held responsible for my actions right now. I don't know what I'll do. Get in the cage and lock it!"

Harry obeyed but pressed against the cage, glasses scraping against the clear pane like nails on a chalkboard. "Draco, I'm so sorry. I know this has to be one of the hardest things you've ever had to hear- and maybe I should have told you myself, but I thought it would be easier for you coming from Hermione, since you two are closer-"

Draco scoffed, willing himself not to draw his wand. What he did permit himself was to stalk up to the cage, and slam his fist hard against the pane. "I give you too much credit, don't I? I always do! Whenever I think you're getting smarter, *Potter,* that you're growing up- it's one step forward, fifteen back!" Harry hadn't flinched at Draco's fist making the glass vibrate between them. He did at Draco's words, looking as confused as he was hurt. "Do you actually think I didn't *know* Severus used to be-"

"You said!" Harry protested, and what Draco had thought some meaningless invention for the others turned out a real belief. "Back in first year! When I came to you after the Quidditch game when my broom was enchanted. I told you Ron and I thought Snape might have been a Death Eater, and you got so angry you kicked me out- you threatened me, you put your wand on my scar-" He touched the lightning bolt, before leaning his face back right against the cage, glasses the only impediment, green eyes dripping with that intolerable pity. "You couldn't bear the idea. I've been really worried about you since I heard, Draco, I knew you wouldn't be able to handle-"

"I'm not as childish as you, *Potter*!" Draco yelled, hitting at the glass again as he seethed impotently. "It wasn't because you said he was! Of *course* he was! Just like my *father*! The

difference between them is Severus *changed.* He was and he changed, but you said, *Once a Death Eater, always a Death Eater*! Is that how it works for you? Still? I swear to the goddess Hecate, Potter, if you say one word about my godfather still working for Voldemort-"

Harry was smiling of all things. "You said the name."

"Because I'm angry, you pillock!" Draco screamed, and drove both fists against the glass, shaking physically with rage. That gorgeous face was just making him more frustrated, in every way imaginable. Being near Harry, sharing friends with him, a school, a cousin, an *existence* where Harry was there, it was too much, like he would never be contented, never be safe or certain of anything. "Are you going to do that? Are you going to accuse him? Because the one *actually* still working for the Dark Lord- if you doubt me, ask your favorite professor Moody- is Karkaroff! The one who turned on the Death Eaters when there was only something in it *for* him! And you didn't even have the nerve to say it to my face-"

"Draco, can I come out of the cage?" Harry asked. Draco lifted his wand and tapped it against the glass grimly.

"Oh, you *can*," Draco drawled, trying to refine his anger down to a more Severus-like sarcasm. "You just might not like the result."

"Draco," Harry said without a bit of fear in his eyes, though that might have been sorer tested without the cage between them. As it was, Draco seemed more afraid of himself than Harry was. "I don't think Snape is behind anything, okay? The last time we were *against* him, we were trying to help Sirius, and everyone thought *he* was a Death Eater. If you say he's changed, then I will believe him. People can change. And I trust you enough to trust in your judgment." Harry took a deep breath, running his hand down the glass like he expected Draco to press his hand against the other side with him. "I just thought you didn't know, and that you'd be devastated when you found out, that's all. Please, Draco, this isn't a repeat of first year, I swear..."

Draco could feel the rage in him finally begin to subside. "Okay. If that's true... maybe... you can come out of the cage."

"So, Karkaroff?" Harry said seriously. Rather than curses, Draco had the room provide them with cushions, and Harry told him everything he'd seen.

Felix Felicis

Chapter Notes

Playlist

It was Draco's fifteenth birthday. He didn't mention it, and hoped everyone would forget about it, but he was given a surprise party at Hagrid's hut by Hagrid, the Gryffindors, Luna, and a preponderance of Weasleys. Someone had made the mistake of letting Hagrid make the cake, but somehow, when Draco blew out the candles, he didn't mind the ramshackle look of the cake, nor even the rock-like taste. He wished that he could save Cedric Diggory's life as he blew out the candles, but then Hagrid set Imoogi beside him to preside over the festivities with him, and in the avalanche of cooing that ensued, he quickly forgot about it.

He and Harry had missed out on one dueling session, but Harry was insistent they skip the review the next week and go on to Baubillious anyway. Harry proved the most inept at that, perhaps because Draco had a sneaking suspicion it was dark magic. But the week after, in their very last session, he caught on quickly to Lacarnum inflamari. It was embittering, teaching Harry that favorite spell of his, after using it to impress him at the World Cup at the start of the year. He was giving away the last of his tricks to Harry, and once he handed them over, he had nothing left for Harry to stick around for.

But when Harry let out a startled whoop, his third fireball attempt flying exuberant orange and full-bodied into the wall and leaving practically half of it singed, Draco couldn't help but smile. "Do you see why I say you're more powerful than me?" Draco said with a smile, coming behind Harry. "Yours are so much stronger than mine, and you're not even doing it right."

"What?" Harry breathed, voice going lower when he felt Draco's arm slide along his to adjust his grip. Draco had made a point of being as hands-off as possible in their previous lessons. But if this was the last one, he could safely reward himself with some of that cliché teacher-student closeness. And reward Harry, too. He was no longer in enough denial not to know this proximity was a reward for Harry, as temptingly thrilling as that knowledge could feel. It was like Sirius had said, though. Harry had been a singularly dedicated and successful student, and now he deserved a bit of carrot with all that stick.

"Like this," Draco said, leaning his head on Harry's shoulder to stare over it, trying not to inhale too much or press his face in at that intoxicating Amortentia scent. The bottom dropped out of his gut as Harry let him take his hand and guide it slowly in the motion. "Like this, see? Try it."

"Your..." Harry swallowed hard, and Draco could feel it against his cheek, the tenseness of Harry's shoulders. "Your hand is still on mine."

"What, Harry," Draco drawled, "Am I really that distracting?"

He could watch the red rise in Harry's cheeks from so close up. "Hardly," Harry hissed, and pulled both their hands together. "Lacarnum inflamari," Harry cast. A gust of fire so strong shot out of his wand that they both staggered back, Draco catching Harry as he nearly fell. The whole far wall and half the ceiling were singed black once the coals faded. Ash dripped down in flakes from the roof. "Oh my God," Harry breathed, and Draco closed his eyes, trying to ignore the way he had felt Harry's magic pulling at his, drawing the fire from within him, how perfectly it had taken it.

"Like I said, Harry," Draco whispered in his ear, "You are *very* powerful. Now, controlling that power? That's the hard part. Let's see how you do at that."

When Draco touched him anytime close to casting the spell, the fire was barely even still a ball, just a roar out of flame, once or twice even without an incantation or wand movement. "Look, Harry," Draco laughed, "You're halfway towards mastering a *Firestorm*."

"Shut up," Harry groaned. "You make it all look so damn easy, don't you? You can pick up the fire in your hands and play with it, pull it around with your fingers, and I can't even..."

It had taken Draco weeks of practicing little else, but let Harry keep thinking him more impressive than he was. "We're out of time, look. No duel again today. You'll have to have your graduation on that note."

"What?" Harry exclaimed, panicked. "No!" He pushed up the sleeves of his soot-stained robe, wiping sweat off his face with determination. "No, Draco! Our lessons aren't over!"

"You aren't going to be a Triwizard champion next year. And anyway, Harry, you can't expect to be freely gifted infinite amounts of my time..."

Harry's jaw set. "You ration it out bit by bit for me, don't you? You don't do that with the others, but with me, I only ever get so much..." His eyes strayed to the hourglass. "Especially *alone*. And it's always on the clock."

"Well, Harry," Draco drawled, "Maybe I don't want you getting any ideas." Harry's mouth opened in astonishment, and Draco's teasing seemed to have been too on-the-nose. "Listen, Harry," he said, pulling Harry's sweat-drenched robes off his shoulders. "It's just that you have the whole world fawning over you. Throwing itself at your feet. You need someone who won't give in and give you anything you want. If you didn't have people who stood up to you like me..." Draco mused, straightening Harry's red and gold tie, "You might get spoiled, and become every bit the arrogant self-obsessed Chosen One that I used to be afraid you could be..."

"So what," Harry breathed, standing obediently for Draco to fuss with him. "It's your job, then? To put me in my place?"

"It's only fair, Harry," Draco laughed, tilting his head and giving him a teasing smirk as he smoothed the tie down. "You're always putting me in mine."

Harry was chewing slowly on his lower lip, mulling it back and forth between his teeth. "I can't think of a single time that's ever happened."

"Think harder," Draco said, and stepped back before one of them did a fool thing like try to kiss the other. "Well, congratulations. Harry Potter, you are now the superior duelist. If you do not go on to win the Triwizard Tournament with ease, I will consider my time exceedingly ill-spent."

"So you want me to win?" Harry asked shyly, ducking his head as if this was some great gift.

"Harry," Draco said, "Delacour was unforgivably rude to Ron. Hermione's kicked Krum to the curb. And the two options from Hogwarts are you and *Diggory.* I wouldn't piss on Diggory if he was on fire. I never liked him that much to begin with, you know. I just used to play that up because I thought it was funny."

"You don't? But he's so grown-up and perfect-looking..."

"Don't *you* go fancying him now. You've done enough to poor Chang already... and no, it is not *just* my fault the school thinks you fancy her, you did your share of sniffing around after her-"

"No," Harry said without much humor in his voice. "No, I really didn't."

Draco forbade his mind from filling out those implications. "Well, you're free to go, Harry. *I'm* going. Bonne nuit et bonne chance."

"Are you part Veela?" Harry blurted as Draco turned to go. Draco gave him a disgusted look. "No, I just mean, you speak French, and er, Fleur is, and your, um, your hair, and your- oh, God..."

"Bonne frigging nuit, blunderbus," Draco said, and made his much-needed exit.

He spent the next two nights sleepless, but for once, it wasn't about Harry and these moronic feelings for him that weren't going away like they should. It was about Harry in a sense, but only in that if Draco and Luna failed at the last hurdle, these dueling lessons might end up some of the very last time he had ever spent with a Harry Potter still breathing.

They were meant to finish the potion at midnight, but Draco came to the Whomping Willow early, and found Luna already there waiting. By now, she had a somewhat stealthier guise, a large black hoodie Hermione had given her that said *A Nightmare on Elm Street: Never Sleep Again* in ominous red letters. He dropped the hood of his own navy blue Arsenal hoodie once they were in the tunnel, and pulled Luna's hood down with a few affectionate tugs. "This is it," she kept saying, eyes twice their usual size. "This is it, this is it, this is really it..."

"Of course," Draco said, pretending to be calm. If it worked, it worked, and if it failed, it failed. No worrying was going to change that now. "It's not like we'll have time to try again. Come on, Luna. One last prayer to the demon goddess Hecate, and then let's do this thing."

Draco inhaled the thick cinnamon air from the so-called ever-burning candles, all of which he'd had to replace at least twice. The potion looked its usual unappetizing charcoal-mud self. "Don't worry about the color, it'll change to wine red once it's cooled and enchanted."

"We take it off at midnight," Luna said, going over and inhaling the scent directly from one of the candles, "And then we wait." She picked up the candle and walked back over. "Okay, Draco. Please close your eyes. Dear Demon Goddess Hecate, we offer you our solemn prayers..."

"I wasn't being serious about that part!"

Luna just gave him a reproachful look. "Now I'll have to start again. We have enough time. Pick up a candle, stand before me, and close your eyes," she ordered. He could hear how over time, she'd taken on some of the bossy inflections of Hermione. "Demon Goddess Hecate, we offer you our solemn prayers. We are your humble servants, who have brought you this offering of blood to bind our beloved to the soil of your everlasting night. We raise up these candles in praise to you..." Draco lifted his obediently, a second after her.

"And in thanksgiving, for your blessing, and for the pomegranates of the underworld, and their color of red wine. Bless us with the red of wine. Bless us with the red of pomegranates. Bless us with the red of blood. Bless us with the red of Harry Potter's blood. Bless us with the red of the sunrise and sunset of the day when Harry Potter is in peril, goddess, and bless him to see that red from Hogwarts where he belongs. Bless us with red, in your holy dark name, goddess." Luna opened her eyes and lowered the candle. "That should do it."

Draco put down the candle, staring at her incredulously. "Did you find that in a book, or did you just come up with all that yourself?"

"I wrote it," Luna said brightly, "And memorized it. It was poetic, wasn't it?"

Draco went over and kissed the top of her head, hugging her from behind. "It was beautiful. And, well, disturbing, but that's very much on brand. I'm really, really proud of you, Luna. I couldn't have asked for anything more from you. You're turning to such an incredible-"

"Oh, Draco, listen, it's your watch! It's 11:59!" Luna exclaimed, thankfully cutting off his sappiness. Draco switched the watch over to reciting seconds, and they stared at each other over the filthy-smelling sooty bubbling, their light icy eyes seeming to float in the dark smoke.

And finally, 59 sounded, and 1 again, and Draco waved his wand to put out the fire.

"So we wait?" Luna said, peering down at the potion.

"We wait," said Draco, and looked over at Luna. "You don't have to stay for this..."

"If you try to make me leave," Luna said, "I'll turn you in to Hermione."

"Okay, okay! Salazar!" Draco laughed. "What do you want to do, then? We shouldn't do anything magical around it yet. Nap? Tell sordid stories? Bring any card games?"

Luna smiled. "I want to hear the story where you and Uncle Sirius dueled the three Aurors."

Draco snorted. "Luna, how many times have you heard that story?"

"One less time than I'd like to," she said, and so he began to tell it again, in all the painstaking detail she could ever wish for.

He had only just gotten to the climactic point where he summoned the music box, when he was cut off with a cry of, "Look! Draco!" She was leaning over the cauldron, and he could see it clear as day, even before he waved his wand and the candles all burned higher and brighter: the potion was. And when they waved their hands above it, the heat was long gone. Only a cool, velvety thick liquid remained, in a navy blue identical to the one of Draco's Arsenal hoodie, except prettier. Luna sat back and began to laugh hysterically, eyes wet. "It worked," she laughed, throwing her head back in a great fall of silver. "It worked, I can't believe it, it actually worked..."

"Wait," Draco said. "One more thing." He took out his wand and did the motion and incantation carefully. "Naufraga captivare. Naufraga captivare. Naufraga captivare."

The third recitation did not spark up with a wall of flame this time. It just turned the potion to a deep, perfect, pomegranate wine red.

"We did it," Luna said, and Draco seized her hand from around the cauldron and kissed it.

"My angel," Draco said. She smiled at him, before leaning back so none of her tears fell to mar the wine red. "Don't cry, Luna..."

"It's not bad," Luna breathed, and he crawled over to hug her. "It's happy tears. I just... I never thought I could do something like this. The potion worked. Whatever happens now, the potion worked. And it wasn't by myself, I just helped you, but... we did it. We did it *right*. I'm not... I'm getting better at magic, aren't I?"

"Luna," Draco said, stroking her hair, "You're not some helpless child anymore. You're not the same little girl that Tom Riddle knew. You're so much stronger..."

Luna burst into violent sobs then, clinging to his hood, and Draco held her more tightly. "Thank you," she whispered. "Thank you, thank you, Draco, thank you..."

"I love you, Luna," he whispered.

"Love you too," she sobbed back. "Love you so much... it's over, isn't it? It's really over..."

"Yeah," Draco said, and kissed her hair, before staring past her at the unbroken wine red. "Yeah, Luna. It's really over."

Draco woke up on the morning of the Third Task with optimism. The Naufragiam potion had been successfully made, and bottled in a number of vials. It had been child's play getting Dobby to let him sneak a few drops into a "special ice cream sundae" for Harry the night

before. He'd told Dobby it was Felix Felicis, and Dobby proved unscrupulous when it came to helping his beloved Harry Potter. And he kept it cold and waited for Draco to have the chance to sit himself and Luna at the Gryffindor table, so Draco could watch Harry eat every bite. Especially of the cherry sauce. He waved cheerily over at Theo at the Slytherin table, then turned his attention back to his prey.

"What are you up to?" Hermione asked when he sat them down at Gryffindor. Her damn sharp nose for Draco's plotting. For the hundredth time, he considered letting her in on his fears. But he knew she would likely have a similar reaction what Severus probably would: even if she did believe him, he'd get some mixture of berating him for keeping it to himself so long, arrogantly taking too much on himself, and ordering him to leave such matters to more qualified intervention, like by the teachers. Well, he had Luna, and that would have to be enough.

"What does it look like?" Draco said, and lied with skill, "I'm showing my allegiances, of course." He shot a nasty look in the direction of Diggory to make it clear at whose expense he meant that. His friends tended to believe his lies more when he embellished them with spiteful motives. "*This*, ladies and gentleman," he said, raising his voice so both Gryffindor and Hufflepuff could hear, "This is the true Hogwarts champion!"

"Oh my God, Draco, *don't*," Harry groaned, mortified, while Gryffindor cheered and Hufflepuff booed. He buried his face in his hands, only to grab Draco's arm when he added,

"If I'm too embarrassing, Harry, I don't *have* to sit with you..."

"No, stay," Harry whined, and it was good Draco had. Harry ate sparingly of the dinner proper, and when the beautiful red and gold Gryffindor sundae arrived with its note from Dobby wishing Harry luck, he shook his head. "It's beautiful, but I can't get it down. Ron, do you want-"

"Harry," Draco said indignantly, "Are you really going to shove off Dobby's heartfelt present on the human Vanishing charm that is Ron Weasley? You know, I don't rate people who aren't respectful of house elves and their feelings. They're the worst sort, aren't they, Striker..."

"You should eat it, Harry," Hermione agreed, "At least a bit," and Harry groaned.

"Alright, alright," he said, and forced down a few bites, but he went entirely for the vanilla ice cream and the golden caramel sauce, avoiding the cherry syrup with its excellent Naufragiam entirely. It was inconsiderate, given the sheer economic expenditure represented by those few drops. Not to mention the labor, and the portion of Harry's own blood within that lurid red.

"Don't you like cherry?" Draco asked. "I told Dobby to use that color, you know, to make it more Gryffindorish." He gave Harry his most charming smile, but Harry just looked queasy.

"I hate cherry," he said, face scrunching up squeamishly. "Sorry, it's just... it was my cousin Dudley's favorite, all these Maraschino cherries, and I never got any..."

"All the more reason to eat the cherries now," Draco said, and in desperation plucked the spoon from Harry's hand and picked up a scoop of ice cream soaked in cherry syrup. "Come on, blunderbus. Open up that ungrateful trap and swallow."

"Draco, he's not going to," Hermione began, but Harry had already leaned forward and eaten the spoonful. "Never mind," she sighed, while Ron sniggered.

"Draco could feed him a whole carton of the sawdust-flavored Every Flavor beans," Ron said none too softly to the girls, "And he'd eat them all up and ask for more..."

"Shut up, Ronald," said Luna, uncharacteristic brusqueness from her, but *she* knew how important it was.

"Come on, Harry," Draco said, and remembered Luna telling him Harry would do whatever Draco said if he flirted with him enough. Desperate times called for desperate measures. "You should let me feed it all to you. For luck." Harry's face had gone redder than the cherry syrup by then, but he obediently opened his lips.

When he made protesting noises, Draco pouted at him. "Harry, don't you *like* me feeding you?" he whined, drawing his fingers along the back of Harry's knuckles, like had used to do to get Theo's attention at the Slytherin table. Harry's lips fell open again. "See, you like it, don't you," Draco purred, and Harry ate every damn bite of that sundae.

And when Draco's charm woke him at six that morning, he had the invisibility cloak in his possession as well. He'd asked for it from Harry before bed that night, and he'd gone right up and down from Gryffindor Tower and handed it over to Draco. Without even asking for a reason.

Draco might have felt guilty manipulating him like that, if it hadn't been for Harry's own salvation. And if he hadn't had his own selfish reasons for enjoying feeding those pretty lips.

He had those lips on his mind as he forced himself out of bed with it still dark out, sneaking out in the cloak to the entrance to Ravenclaw. She slipped in under it with him, smelling of black tea. He declared her a modern miracle as she gave him a hot mug of it for him as well, though it had been Dobby to magic them into the Ravenclaw common room. It was nice to have allies. She held up the cloak over them as they made their way out to the grounds and he drank. When he was done and had vanished the cup away, she opened her robe pocket and showed him the small vial of Felix Felicis from Christmas.

"Luna, I told you, you don't have to use yours for this," he whispered, and she frowned.

"What could be more important to use it for?"

"I don't know," he drawled, "Maybe if you wanted to give Neville another shot," and she squealed and clawed at his chest.

They arrived at the broomshed without incident. The light coming up in the sky showed through the loose old boards of the shed. It was just outside the far side of the maze where it had replaced the Quidditch pitch, and would provide a good launching post for their foray. He

gave her his Nimbus 2001 and took a school broom himself, which should put them at about the same speed. He had learned from his mistake with Severus and Sirius last year.

"It's seven am," Luna said, and opened the shed, staring out at the sun nearly up, the pink glow turning to a fuller gold over the towering green hedges. "Twelve hours, Severus said?"

"Dinner will finish early," Draco told her, "And the task at just around seven at night or a bit later. By that time, the maze will be warded off to everyone but the competitors, and there won't be anything we can do, even if we wanted to. Our part is before then. The safeguarding."

"So we might as well take it," Luna said, and they unstoppered their vials and lifted them together. "No looking back now?"

"No looking back," Draco said, raised it in a silent toast, and they drank it down together.

Immediately, Draco's chest filled with unbelievable confidence, his face breaking into an ear-splitting grin to match Luna's. What had he been worrying about? He was going to be fine, and was surely going to get everything he wanted, when it felt this much like the sun shining into the shed was shining purely for them. "Luna," Draco said, "I have a very good feeling about this."

"So do I!" Luna beamed. "And I think we should fly right away and not wait any longer! It feels like the right thing to do!"

"I think so too!" Draco enthused, and they mounted their brooms. As he directed, she joined him at a very tall height above the maze, soaring past its winding turns, before hovering directly over the center. "Look, the cup is there already? See it!" Luna cried out excitedly, and began to fly straight down. "Wait, you don't think there will be any warding?"

"Not yet, not from above! No, I think it will all be fine if we just hurry!" she shouted, and he could feel the same confidence piping into his veins in return. He swooped down as fast as if he was chasing the Snitch, and awaiting there was the sparkle of a far greater prize. Was it a Portkey yet? It didn't matter. It wouldn't be when Draco was done with it-

And then someone had stepped in between Draco and the cup, cutting it from view, cutting all the sunshine from view. The sky could have been full of storms, it could have been a Dementor before him for how cold it suddenly became, inside and out. The cup was being defended by Aunt Bella. "Boggart," Draco gasped, scrambling back. Luna had landed at a wider distance, and called out in concern. "Boggart, Luna, it's a Boggart, stay back..."

"Is that your Aunt Bella?" Luna called, and she sounded chilled as well by the sight of the regal, wild-haired, cruel-faced woman in ragged black robes that was advancing on Draco, hand outstretched towards his wand. "Draco, cast Riddikulus! We learned about Boggarts in Defense this year, though Professor Moody couldn't find one for us to fight... but that spell's said to work..."

"Riddikulus," Draco said, lifting his hand, scrunching his eyes shut, "Riddikulus!" He had taken the Felix Felicis, so even if he couldn't have last year, he should be lucky now-

He wasn't lucky. Aunt Bella was laughing, cooing out obscenities about how her whore of a nephew had disgraced their blood, and the ways she was going to punish him. Draco felt his knees give way underneath him, teeth chattering from the frostbite in his limbs, as helpless as if she had cast the Cruciatus curse on him already...

"Draco!" Luna called, and then she had dropped her broom and raced forward, pushing him aside. "Don't worry, I'll vanquish it! Get back! I can do this!"

"Luna, wait," Draco said weakly, shaking on the ground, and watched the sight he feared come to pass. Aunt Bella turned in a twist of shadow to Tom Riddle, immaculate in his Slytherin uniform, as tall, dark, and sinisterly handsome as ever. His face was blank in the moment the Boggart changed, and then, slowly, sweetly, the corners of his pretty lips turned up into a soft smile.

"Luna, are you alright- Luna, you don't have to-"

Luna stood there frozen for a long moment, legs beginning to shake, and she looked at Tom like she wanted to flee. Then she looked back at Draco, seemed to realize he couldn't do it, and decide she had to be the one. Even if she didn't think she could either.

"I'm Xenophilius Lovegood's daughter," she said to herself, and straightened her shoulders.

But when she shouted Riddikulus, nothing happened for her either. Tom walked towards Luna with that smile as if in slow motion, all of Draco's insides melting at that terrible sight. If his legs would work, he would have thrown himself between them, because he couldn't let this happen. He couldn't let him touch her again. He had to save her-

"Riddikulus!" Luna shouted again, and with a twisting sound, Tom Riddle turned to the blinking, bewildered figure of Harry Potter, staring down at his tie looking dismayed to find himself in a Slytherin uniform. "Back!" she shouted at Harry, waving her wand and sending him stumbling past the cup. "Draco, disable the Portkey!"

"Portus clausus!" Draco yelled, and a dark purple light surged out from his wand, enveloping the cup with a resistance that surged back up against his hand. That was the telltale resistance that meant it was a Portkey and not just an ordinary object he was casting against, and the resistance was potent. He closed his eyes and prolonged the spell, envisioning every way open to fly around them slowly being foreclosed for that paltry cup.

When he opened his eyes, the cup was shaking, whirling in circles in the air, and then with a great screeching noise, a mass of images exploded out of the cup, in the shape of gravestone after gravestone. When the cup finally fell to the slab again, Draco took a deep breath, and cast Portus clausus again. There was no reaction.

"Is it done?" Luna panted, and Draco mounted his broom, throwing hers in her direction.

"Yes, definitely!" Draco shouted. "But you're right, I think we have to be quick!"

He and Luna flew out of there like Harry had summoned his Firebolt and followed on their tails, though in truth, in that Slytherin uniform, it wasn't the most horrifying image. Draco

had reason to thank the Felix Felicis, which seemed to be supplying them with these random lucky instincts, as they made it into the broomshed only just before they heard voices. Ludo Bagman and Cornelius Fudge were strolling along the perimeter of the maze, talking about whether it was right that Hogwarts have a half-giant as their groundskeeper.

"I think the Felix Felicis is keeping us from making a mistake," Luna told him as they put their brooms back, looking less shaken from her encounter with Tom Riddle than he had been. "We wouldn't have wanted to go right then, I don't think, if we hadn't been going to be able to hold off the Boggart. So when you couldn't, I knew I was the one who could do it."

"Luna, I've never been able to defeat a Boggart. Not once. I don't know how you managed to face Tom bloody Riddle down, but however you did, thank you."

Luna beamed at the praise, then looked confused. "Never?" she said. "But you got a perfect score on your Defense exam." She thought longer. "Is that because the professor was Uncle Remus?"

"Uncle Remus?" Draco hissed back disbelievingly as they got under the cloak and began sneaking back to the castle, Draco holding up the cloak and Luna holding the Marauder's Map open between them.

"Well, he's practically Uncle Sirius's husband. I know it's not legal, but I think it would be nice if they got married, don't you?"

They took off the cloak once they were inside and out of side, crouching together over the map in planning. "Where's Viktor Krum?" Luna's finger trailed over until they found him in the middle of the lake. "Durmstrang ship. Luna, I think Cr- I think Karkaroff will enchant Krum to try and help him. But how are we going to protect Krum all day when we have exams?"

"I think," Luna said slowly, but very confidently, "That we need to go to the Owlery."

"The Owlery?" Draco repeated, and then it seemed a very good idea to him as well.

So they skipped breakfast and climbed up straight to the Owlery, where they waited for Viktor Krum. He soon came up to write a letter, with an eagle owl awaiting him to carry it that looked almost as gloomy as he did. "Viktor," Luna said, "Hello," and Krum stared at her blankly.

"Er," he said, clearly not recognizing her, "Hello," only for his face to darken when he saw Draco. "Vat do you vant?" Draco waited for the reason they had come here to manifest before him, only for Krum to supply it when he said, "Cornering me to give Potter a last-minute advantage?"

"Not at all, Viktor," Draco said, exchanging a worried look with Luna. "Actually, we're here to help you. See, this here is Luna, my cousin. She's a Ravenclaw, and very intelligent. Her father's a newspaper owner, you might have seen her in a dress covered in *diamonds* at the Yule Ball... she's a big fan of yours, you know..."

Draco hoped Krum would meet a fan with more enthusiasm when it was a pretty rich girl and not a Ron Weasley. He did look to her with less suspicion than Draco, though his face went strained when she brightly added, "Oh, yes, I love it when the players get injured."

"In the Wronski Feint," Draco added hurriedly. "Like you did in the World Cup! You were there, weren't you, Luna?"

"Oh, yes," Luna said earnestly, clasping her hands in front of herself. "It was very exciting."

"Oh, vell, yes, thank you," said Krum, and then looked more serious. "Vat did you mean, trying to help me?"

The best way to get someone to listen to you was to act like you didn't want to tell them. "No, you know what, it's okay," Draco said, stepping back towards the door. "He'll be okay, don't you think, Luna? We don't need to bother him anymore."

And sure enough, Krum had stalked forward and slammed his hand in the way of the door before Draco could leave. "No vay, Malfoy. If you have heard that someone is planning to sabotage me, you had better say it now!"

Draco remembered all the stories after the disastrous Third Task in the blue loop, both Krum's vicious attacks on the other champions, Fleur Delacour extracted in tears, and Krum never being punished after, with it proven he had been under the Imperius curse. He'd told Luna of his 'suspicion' Karkaroff- read, really Crouch and maybe Karkaroff- would do that. Removing that would be one factor to make it easier for Harry to triumph without incident. "Okay, fine, no need to go all Cro-Magnon about it. Luna, tell him what you heard."

Luna turned an appealingly vulnerable, frightened look up towards the big burly Quidditch star. "I heard that Headmaster Karkaroff is planning to cast the Imperius curse on you. I was on a walk around the lake and I heard him talking about it with Mr. Bagman. He said you've gotten too distracted with that Muggleborn girl, and that you don't have enough killer instinct-"

"He is alvays saying those things to me!" Krum exploded in frustration, Luna having hit just the right note to convince him. "He does not trust my instincts at all!"

"And that he needs to give you that extra push to win, so he's going to enchant you to go after the other champions and attack them in the maze. Rather than just letting you try to win your own way," Luna finished, and Krum looked ready to hunt down Karkaroff and throttle him with his bare hands. "And I don't want you to get in any trouble, Viktor, you're *such* a talented Seeker..."

"I vill confront him at once!" Krum raged, but Draco caught him by the arm.

"No, Viktor, think," Draco soothed him. "Don't you think that if you call him out openly, he'll attack you? That man is so jumpy. No, what you need to do is stay with him. Don't let him out of your sight. He can't curse you without you noticing if you're looking at him all the time..."

"I vill!" Krum exclaimed. "I vill not let him blink an eye vithout my knowledge! He vill not outvit me! Do not vorry, Luna, I vill survive to play for Bulgaria again vith my reputation intact, and the Trivizard Cup to add to all my trophies!"

"Wow," Luna said, starry-eyed, "My hero," and Draco thought she was laying it on a bit thick, but Krum with his dented ego seemed to need the affirmation.

"Hey, Viktor," Draco said before he left, "Make sure you meet up with us just before the Third Task starts, so we can check in with you and make sure you aren't bewitched, okay? Don't let him out of your sight for a moment." Krum nodded and strode out. "Wow. This has all been way easier than I thought. I mean, he's too old for you, but Luna, good job playing the flirt card!"

"The what?" Luna said blankly.

"Never mind," Draco said, and threw an arm around her shoulders. "You know, rather than keep running around, I feel like our job here is done. I've got to run before I miss my History of Magic exam, okay? And you can get in some cramming, if you need it!"

"I feel like I'm going to know all the answers!" she called happily after him.

And Draco had answers swimming right to his head on the History of Magic exam like never before, like he never even had on a Potions exam. The bewildering speed made him understand why this potion was banned during exams. He made sure to go slowly and answer a few questions incorrectly, while monitoring the Marauder's Map in his lap covertly the entire time. The Viktor Krum and Igor Karkaroff dots were staying satisfyingly close together.

Draco was walking to the Slytherin table for lunch, but some instinct told him he should spend the rest of the day sitting with the Gryffindors. Another instinct told him to gesture Luna to come with him. "Hey, champion," Draco said, dropping into the seat beside him and ignoring the stares. "Nervous yet?"

"You have no idea," Harry whispered. "Why weren't you and Luna at breakfast?" Luna, meanwhile, was telling a story with unusual energy, drawing the attention of Ron and Harry.

"Preparing a surprise for you," Draco whispered back, though he had no such thing. "Wait for it at dinner."

Harry's eyes lit up, his forearm sliding along Draco's on the table. "You're going to sit with us at dinner too?"

"Yeah," Draco said, and poked at Harry's arm with his index finger, making a face scrunching up and jerking his cheeks from side to side. "How else will you get your surprise, Harry? Do try to keep up."

"Sorry," Harry said, very happily, ears bright red, and Draco wanted to kiss them, whoever was watching. But he didn't, he never did, and none of the chemical confidence in his veins told him it would be a good idea to either.

Draco didn't have an exam that afternoon, so he divided it between watching Karkaroff and Krum on the Marauder's Map, watching Harry, and trying to figure out what "surprise" would be a good vehicle to put a tracking charm on. It had to be something Harry would wear for sure. It made him think of ancient stories Mother would tell of champions in the more literal sense, knights who went into battle. Or into tournaments, as in this case, when they would wear the favor of a lady as luck for them in combat. He wondered what Harry would find an irresistible enough *favor*-

Oh, wait, that was easy to answer. But in the *tracking charm* sense.

He sat down between Harry and Hermione that night at supper, with cordial nods to Molly and Bill Weasley nearby, and took the anxiety off Harry's face with a beaming smile. "What's with you today, anyway?" Hermione whispered skeptically. "You've been acting so *nice.*"

"I told you," Draco whispered back, "If Diggory wins the Triwizard Tournament, I'll be forced to turn to a life of crime and murder him so I don't have to watch his smug face..."

"Why do I ask you questions?" Hermione said despairingly, and turned back to Ron.

"Well?" Harry said in his other ear, clearly having been waiting for his chance to talk to him. "What is this about my surprise? It's not another dessert, is it?"

"No," Draco said, "Not hardly," and reached into his pocket, before turning his body towards Harry's. "Here, turn towards me. I don't want anyone else to see."

"Draco, this isn't illegal, is it?"

"It's just something for you to wear," Draco told him, "For luck. Like a knight going into a tournament. You're supposed to have something like that, or you were back in old times. A favor." Harry looked blank. "Like you have *my* favor."

"Do I," Harry whispered nervously, eyes straying down Draco, "Have, um, your favor?"

"You have this," said Draco, and handed him a little gold-wrapped package smaller than his palm. Harry opened it, and found a slender golden ring in the shape of a rose. "It's a real rose, from the greenhouses. It was white. I transfigured it, and shrunk it, and covered it in gold. No magic on it but that. But it will look good on your hand, Harry."

"You... you never make me jewelry," Harry said, looking more stunned than he would have been by a shrunken little severed head. "You just do that, that beautiful transfigured jewelry of yours for the people you really care about, like Snape and Hermione and Luna, not *me*..."

"Harry Potter," Draco said, and took his hand, "Will you wear my favor or not?"

"Yeah," Harry said, with a smile so guileless and ecstatic it could have broken anyone's heart. "Yeah, Draco, of course, will you put it on?" And so it was that Draco found himself crouching in close to Harry at Gryffindor table, less than half an hour before the start of the Third Task, sliding a golden ring onto the ring finger of Harry's wand hand, the tracking charm already activated on it.

Draco and Luna had taken turns watching the Marauder's Map, and Krum had been as good as his word, up to the start of the Task. When they snuck off from Harry towards Krum, they found him with not just Karkaroff but Crouch, who was trying to take Krum off for a brief chat. "Just a few things I need to check," Crouch said menacingly, "In *your* student," but Krum wasn't budging.

"No," he kept insisting. "Ve can talk after. But I vill stay until the task is over vith my Headmaster."

"Good boy," Draco whispered, and raised a hand to Krum. He lifted one back, nodding at them, and that was good enough for Draco. It seemed constant vigilance had worked for Krum, if not Crouch, who went off looking frustrated. *Too bad, so sad, no Imperius for you tonight.*

Harry and the others were still milling around the Gryffindor table. When they strolled back over, Harry's green eyes widened at them, or more honestly, at Draco, in the falling dusk from the enchanted ceiling above. Harry held up his left hand, where the small golden rose gleamed, and Draco couldn't help it. He strode forward, as fast as he could, and pressed his mouth to Harry's hand, hard, with impulsive feeling. "You're going to win," Draco told Harry, though the words were more for himself. "You're going to be fine."

"Draco," Harry said, trying to catch his gaze, as Ron and Hermione shook their heads in the background. "Draco, don't worry, I know I'm going to be fine."

"He was like this for the First Task, you know," Hermione said with a fond sigh. "He just hid his face in my hair and wouldn't look up until we said it was over. It's almost lucky he was unconscious for the second one."

"Looks like he'd rather be for the third," Ron observed.

"I just want it to be over," Draco whined, feeling the comedown off the Felix Felicis starting. The artificial sunlight of the confidence stripped from him made the world seem darker than it would have before. "What if something happens to you? I'd never forgive myself, Harry, never-"

"It's not on you," Harry told him, touching Draco's cheek and guiding his face up to his. "Draco, you've done everything you can to help me get ready. You all have." He turned to face the four of them, his faithful if not entirely forthcoming friends, and gave a brave smile, his earlier nerves looking washed away. "How could I not be fine when I've had all of you behind me?" His hand stayed on Draco's cheek, stroking over it. Draco pressed his face shudderingly against Harry's palm, burying it there, just trying to breathe.

"Take care of Draco," was the last thing Harry said to any of them, laughing as he pushed Draco into Hermione's arms, before the call came for the champions to head towards the maze. Molly Weasley gave him a firm, motherly hug, and they all called out their wishes of luck, before Harry had to turn and leave them behind.

The Victor

Chapter Notes

Playlist

The Third Task was a long one for Draco to spend the entire time with his face buried in Hermione's hair. But he made the attempt.

And his face was thoroughly smushed in Hermione's thick bushy hair when everyone around him began to cry out and jump around in confused excitement. Had a dead body arrived? "Draco!" Hermione hissed. "Draco, it's over! Gold sparks!"

"Someone's in danger?" Draco hissed, only for her to physically extract him from her shoulder to shake him.

"Draco Malfoy!" she said firmly. "*Gold* means someone's touched the cup and they'll be bringing it out! It means someone's won!"

"If it was this quick," Ron said, "It's Harry for sure."

That was a lot quicker than last time, though there had hopefully been no unauthorized detours. Draco still couldn't make himself open his eyes, until Hermione shook him again. "The maze is opening," Hermione told him. "It's enchanted, it's making a path! I think the champion is going to come out from it! Draco, look, you'll regret if you don't!"

So Draco opened his eyes, and saw the crowd all around, above and below, waving their banners and colors in hope and fear of who would emerge down that path. Luna looked just as queasy as he did, but Ron was helping her hold up the sign she had brought for Harry: *Harry Potter, Basilisk Slayer*, with a very fine sparkly drawing of a Basilisk beneath the red and gold letters. How had he missed her making and bringing that? He'd really had tunnel vision on Harry, and then on not seeing anything at all.

And Draco could have cast the tracking charm, to try and see before anyone else whether it was Harry coming down that path, as the hedges opened line by line, the maze collapsing outwards in a great haze of green and dust. The enchanted floodlights above had gone golden against the fall of the night, and with each row of hedges that opened, their gold went a shade brighter, until they were so bright that the first sight of a robed figure carrying the cup was a mere silhouette before the brilliant gold.

"Harry?" Ron was calling. "Harry, is that Harry? Is it him who's got the cup?"

"It is," Hermione said, "I'm sure it is, he's worked so hard..."

"We've all worked so hard," Ron groaned in exhaustion, but clasped his hands together as if in prayer. For a man who'd been this horrified to see his best friend become a champion, he seemed incredibly anxious for him to win.

"We have," said Luna, "He'll win," and Hermione squeezed her hand along with Draco's.

"It's him," Hermione said, "He'll win." And then, although the silhouette with the cup was still almost all in shadow, Draco saw a glinting in it around the face, and then a rounded shape that made him realize: the figure was wearing glasses.

"It's him!" Draco yelled. "It's Harry, he's won, he's won!"

And the final row of hedges opened, and Harry strode out of the maze looking every inch a champion, his distant figure in champion's robes something from a fever dream, haloed in gold from every side. Like something that had climbed down out of a dream too good to be true, and stood there before them now, the Triwizard Cup in his hands. Which had, in the end, become just a cup.

"Harry!" Hermione shrieked. "You did it, you did it, oh my God..." She began to cry hysterically. Draco hugged her, his heart pounding so fast he thought it would burst. She opened her arm and let Luna hug her other side, while Ron was embraced by a shrieking, elated Ginny, and then his brothers and mother, all screaming out in complete, untainted golden happiness. The entire Gryffindor section, and then the entirety of Hogwarts, were all on their feet cheering, even the Slytherins. "HARRY! HE'S WON!" Hermione screamed, loud enough to burst Draco's eardrums, and Draco laughed shakily in her ear.

"Don't cry, Striker," he laughed, wiping at the tears that were streaming unrestrained down her face. "Don't cry, everything's fine now, everyone is going to be fine..."

And everyone was. The maze made way in turn for the other three champions, all of whom looked a bit worse for wear, sweaty and bedraggled, bloodstained in Diggory's case. But none of them looked enchanted, none of them looked too badly hurt, and all of them were unmistakably alive. Even Cedric Diggory, and Draco's mind shorted out for a long time, staring at Diggory's disappointed but still proud frame, as he stood there in a line behind the victorious Harry Potter. Had Draco really done it? Had he managed to change things enough to save a life?

He could think of better candidates to have saved than Diggory, mind. Especially once he saw the champions' parents called to join them in the ceremony, taking their places behind Dumbledore, Bagman, Fudge, Maxime, and an extremely disgruntled Karkaroff. Photographers were coming out, Skeeter's blonde hair visible as she directed a pack of her own to get shots of Harry. Diggory, Krum, and Delacour shook hands with Harry with varying degrees of sportsmanship. Then Harry was directed to put the cup on a golden stand, which rose from the grass majestically.

The other three went past the line of the headmasters and judges, with a silver medal hung around each of their necks in turn. No ranking for them, only winners and losers. Each one had their chance to walk past the cup and glance at it longingly, and of course be captured by the veritable wall of photographers at doing so. Harry came forward in turn, a golden medal

hung around his neck. Dumbledore raised his wand and used what must be the Flagrate spell to draw letters on the dark sky above them, great and glowing gold: *Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry, 1993-94. Champion: Harry James Potter.*

The crowd's hysteria rose to a new pitch, and then with a sweeping gesture of his arm, the letters disappeared from the sky, and flew onto the trophy, where a bright sparkling made it clear they were being engraved. Dumbledore clasped Harry by the shoulders, said something in his ear that looked very proud, and stepped aside.

Harry picked up the cup and raised it high above his head. Draco stayed on his feet, screaming and cheering with the mass of people around him with the same feeling of unreality. Nearly every time he had tried to change something in the red line, he had either failed or made it worse. Could he and Luna have really done it? Could they have foiled the Dark Lord together, a bitter time-traveling Slytherin and his tiny, traumatized, fourteen-year-old fake cousin?

At one point, Harry waved up at the stands, seemingly trying to spot his friends in the chaos. Molly Weasley had given him a hug for the ages, before guiding his gaze and pointing in their direction. Harry shaded his eyes and waved up where she indicated, though he didn't seem able to see them. But Ginny practically busted a lung screaming for him anyway. *Don't worry, girl. Whatever he thinks he feels for me, the champion will transfer his affections to you soon enough.*

Fireworks erupted above them, not in red and gold, but in red and blue and yellow and even green for all four houses of Hogwarts. It seemed impossible to deny that yes, Draco and Luna had changed the course of the world.

Draco stayed with the others through the ceremony, but when the stands began emptying, he went in the opposite direction from his friends and the Weasleys. "Draco, we're all going to celebrate with Harry, you heard," Hermione said, and Draco rolled his eyes.

"In Gryffindor Tower, right?" he asked, Ron nodded obliviously. "How many times do I have to remind all of you, I'm banned there? I'll catch up with you tomorrow, alright?" He had one last part of the plan to finish, namely in the dungeons: going to Severus and telling him who Mad-Eye Moody really was. He would just say he'd seen him stealing Polyjuice from the store rooms.

"You don't think there'd be an exception, just this once?" Luna asked sadly, but in truth, Draco was so exhausted he couldn't stand the idea of a party anyway.

"Harry will want to see you," Hermione persisted, waving the others on. As they left, Draco could hear Bill Weasley asking his sniggering brothers why Draco was banned from their tower.

Hermione pulled them aside from the stream of excited Hogwarts students pouring back inside. The sight of so many people around to overhear made her walk them further away, casting a Lumos and leading him until they were hidden around the corner of one side of the maze.

"Shouldn't you be congratulating your best friend right now?" Draco sighed.

I've got a dark wizard to unmask, Hermione, can it wait?

"Harry is my friend," Hermione said with a significant look, "And so is Ron, and so is Luna. But you're my *best* friend. You know that, don't you?" Draco nodded shakily. She flipped her wand in the air, making Bluebell flames appear to light the way between them, before extinguishing her wand and taking both his hands. "Even if you keep secrets from me. All the time. *Still*."

"I'm sorry," Draco said with a curious hitch in his voice. He thought he'd gotten over most of his voice cracking from puberty back in third year, but no one in either timeline had ever made him feel half as guilty as Hermione. "If I had the choice, Hermione, I would tell you anything and everything. Every single secret I've ever had." *Even what I'm about to tell about Crouch.* And he found he meant it, to her at least.

"But there are some things that I just can't ever tell," he sighed, thinking of the Langlock with bitterness, "And that means I can't explain so many things I do and why, and I never want you to think worse of me... I never want you to hate me, Hermione, I want you to know who I am..."

"I know who you are, Draco Malfoy," she said, big brown eyes steady on his under the glow of bluebell flames and the fading fireworks. "I know you're in love with Harry Potter."

Draco's heart sank to his feet. He tried to pull his hands from hers and step away, but she wasn't having it. "Look at me," she insisted. "Who do you think told Harry to ask you to the Yule Ball? I'd suspected for a while that he liked you, he's not exactly subtle, it was almost a joke between Ron and I, how obsessed he was with you... but he'd never admit a thing, always deny. Until the Yule Ball, and he admitted he wanted to ask you, so I talked him into it. I never thought he'd chicken out and claim it was just *friends*, and you'd just stay oblivious..."

"Hermione," Draco pleaded, "I don't want to know this, I can't know this..."

She pressed her fingertips into his palms reproachfully until he looked back up and listened.

"You know it already," she said steadily. "You definitely have since the Second Task. You could have kept up that incredible denial of yours until then, but after the entire school saw you were the thing he valued most in the entire world..."

"Stop!" Draco insisted. Her swollen face with its tears dried up took on a tentative smile.

"I really hated you for that sometimes, you know," Hermione said with a sigh, "That denial of yours, it seemed so convenient, so selfish, that you could just ignore the effect you had on him because it was easier for you. But it's not that, is it? It's that you *do* like him back-"

"Hermione," Draco said, hands shaking in hers now, "How did you know? You know I wasn't *really* in his dorm in third year to invade his bed..."

"I wondered," Hermione said with an indulgent cast to her face, "Ever since you started calling me and Ron by our names, but Harry as just *Potter*. It made me think about how hard you try to keep him at a distance, and the more I knew you, the more I thought maybe it was... I don't know. But I wasn't completely sure until now, Draco. You do, don't you? You love him."

Draco nodded slowly. "Please, Hermione, you won't tell him, will you?" She nodded solemnly. "It's not... this isn't some fairytale, Hermione. Nothing can ever come of it-"

"I'm not saying you have to do anything about it, or date him," Hermione said, rolling her eyes. "We're all still so young, and I didn't think having the Yule Ball forced on all of us like this was entirely healthy. I, for one, feel too young to seriously date. We have our studies to focus on, not to mention all the trouble Harry seems to get in. But at the least, Draco, you could stop pretending that you don't mean the world to him. And don't you think that means coming and congratulating him on the biggest night of his life? He deserves that much."

"He deserves everything," Draco said, and resisted the urge to tell her, *That's why you should want me to stay away from him.* But he just gave her a weak smile and promised, "Alright, I'll be along in a minute. If he's in Gryffindor already, I'll have you send him to the door to me, alright? I'll congratulate him. I just need a second."

"Draco," Hermione said firmly, "There's nothing to be ashamed of, falling in love," and hugged him so tightly he felt they both would burst, before rattling her bracelet in his face. He flicked the H for Hermione, and watched her stride back alone towards the castle.

He closed his eyes and made himself breathe. In, out, in, out, over and over until he felt calm enough to face Harry-

"Finally. I thought the Mudblood would never leave. Imperio!"

A warmth swam over Draco's body, a bright golden contentment to replace all his agitation, a brief spark of alarm fading at that respite. All the comedown from the Felix Felicis, all the doubt, all the terrible unending series of choices before him went up in a sweet haze. There was nothing but faith that everything would be perfectly fine as long as he did as he was told...

A man with his wand trained on him stepped out of the shadows. At the sight of Crouch, another voice tried to rise in the back of Draco's mind, instinctual fear puncturing his certainty that everything was alright. *This is my enemy, he hates me, he told everyone about my wand...*

Crouch pointed his wand at him and cast the Imperius curse again. "That's better, isn't it?" he sneered. "No more worries, blood traitor. Just obey."

After Draco got his instructions, he walked back to the castle in dazed contentment, something like the Felix Felicis but without its edge. *Go back to the castle*, he had been instructed first. The voice in his head was like his own thoughts directing him but better, wiser, without the weight of anxiety. He was to go to Gryffindor Tower, he knew that much, except he was supposed to be sure that Harry would do what he wanted. So he went down to

the dungeons, into the fourth-year dorm. Harry often did what Draco said, but he had to be perfect, without a doubt, or else Harry would just stay with his friends and then sleep. Draco had to be exactly what Harry would want. More than he was already.

None of his dormmates were back, out in the common room having their own celebration. Draco went to the mirror and fixed his hair, affixing it with the silver S clasp, then changed from his Slytherin uniform to Muggle clothes, because that was what Harry liked more. So that meant nice black leather shoes, fitted black slacks, and something red. Harry had said once that he thought Draco would look the best in red.

He didn't have anything very red of his own, so he went through the other boys' wardrobes. The warm conviction he was doing the right thing killed any scruples he would have had ransacking his dormmates' possessions without asking. He found a red shirt in Theo's trunk that looked never-worn, probably because of the color, though it was a darker red. A wine red, like pomegranates, like-

What are you doing? Why are you doing this? You don't want to- Harry is-

I want to see Harry. I want to be alone with him. That's all I need to think about.

He left the top few buttons of the silk shirt undone, and hung a dragon necklace around his neck, the gleaming black of a Hungarian Horntail like Harry had defeated. When Draco put on his mother's gift, the reminder of her sent another cold wash of misgivings through him, but he couldn't understand them. He was doing the right thing, making the right people happy. He was going to make his mother very proud.

He put the talon wand in his side pocket, stroking its bent shape, remembering Crouch staring at it and telling him, *You're unworthy of this, I should rip it from your filthy blood traitor hands, but you're going to need this tonight...*

"You really have given up on questioning that wand, haven't you?"

Theo stood watching him, he didn't know for how long, a skeptical look on his face that filled Draco with a rush of wariness and a simultaneous low murmur of hope. Draco straightened to face that keen, intelligent face with a sneer of the swagger he needed to blow past it. "Jealous?"

Theo blinked several times, looking genuinely more confused than anything. "Jealous? Why would I... Draco, is that my shirt you're wearing?"

Draco considered, then ran a hand through his hair and cocked his hip, smirking at Theo to double down on this pretense of confidence, while some voice in the process of being drowned was trying to cut through him and reach for Theo as its last lifeline. "I didn't think you'd get much use out of it regardless, Theo. Will you ever actually wear red?"

"Burgundy," Theo said, of all the most inane arguments to stall the wheel of fate from crashing down. "It's burgundy. Like burgundy wine."

"Burgundy is a shade of red. Wine red," Draco said. *Naufragiam red.*

Theo tilted his head, pretty blue eyes calm. "Some," he commented mildly, "Would classify it as a shade of purple. Or... indeterminate."

"Well, I'm sorry, Theo, I'm wearing it to the victory party in Gryffindor," Draco drawled, "And really, you have to admit, it has to look far better on me."

"I thought you were banned from Gryffindor Tower," Theo said slowly, and Draco wanted to strike him, at the same time he wanted to plead, *Save me.* The haze seemed to double over his split mind, though, at that hint of resistance. *See* through *me, Theo, you're smart enough, you can see through me and stop this, you were always smart enough to stop me at* anything *if you just* cared *enough-*

"Outside it, then," Draco said, and put an edge into his voice. "I think Harry Potter will like it, and that's what counts."

"Oh," Theo said, unimpressed. "So the world indeed does revolve around what Harry Potter likes."

"Don't be jealous, Theo," Draco said, and pulled another necklace out of his suitcase. "Here. A surety, for your shirt. You can have this until I give your shirt back, if it means so much to you."

Theo looked down at the carved opal dragon on a chain Draco had given him. "You have the full set?" He turned it over in the dim light with academic curiosity, while Draco's stomach careened, underneath the facade of security.

Stop me stop me stop me, care*, for once in your life*, *Theo, please, please, please just give a shit about me-*

"Yes. From my mother. This is the Antipodean Opaleye," Draco said, and laughed hollowly at Theo's Severus-like drawl of *Obviously.* "Now, I really have to be going. You can keep Astaroth safe for me until we make the trade back, alright?"

"Astaroth," Theo echoed, staring down at the dragon thoughtfully, and Draco smiled.

"See you later, alright?" *Probably not.*

Theo just nodded, and didn't look up as Draco left the dorm.

The voice that had been pleading went silent.

Once dressed for the part, Draco climbed the stairs to Gryffindor Tower, just as Crouch had ordered. He didn't have to wait long. Dean and Seamus were heading inside, and stopped when they saw Draco waiting. "Aw, man, poor guy," said Dean, shaking his head. "Your ban still held up even tonight?" Draco nodded with an appropriately sorrowful look on his face. "Damn. I know Harry would want you here for the party." He held up the bag of Butterbeers they were carrying and offered Draco one. "Weasley twins said there's more where that came from."

"No thanks," said Draco, striving to look as harmless as possible. "I have higher aspirations. Bring Potter to me." He tried to take a humorously haughty tone. "Hermione made it clear in no uncertain terms that if I did not wish Saint Potter congratulations tonight, I would be in the market for a new best friend, so Seamus, unless you want some competition for Dean's friendship..."

"Okay, okay," Seamus laughed. "We'll send him out. We still on for football this weekend, mate? Last one of the year. We can bring all the boys."

"Yeah," Draco said with a grin, although a part of his mind was saying that neither him nor Harry might be there to play it. But that couldn't be, because everything really did feel so good now...

"Draco?" Harry said, staring at him, and Draco must have been staring into space. He'd somehow missed Harry emerging out through the portrait. He had the golden rose ring on, which he lifted to show Draco with a small smile.

He also had golden confetti in his hair, with a piece of it fallen on the frame of his glasses. Draco reached out and picked it off. Harry smiled at him wider, with the look of someone who'd been admitted into heaven and was still unsure how he'd managed to pay the entrance fees.

"Dean and Seamus said..."

"I've been informed," Draco said loftily, "That I was remiss not to immediately congratulate you on your victory, though really, it's not like it was *surprising*, given the caliber of competition..."

"You're always such a prick," Harry laughed affectionately, and swayed on his feet towards Draco, as if he could half-convince himself Draco was part of his prize. All the thousand Galleons he'd just won, and Draco knew which of the two prizes Harry would have chosen.

"A prick," Draco drawled, "Who came to congratulate you, so..."

Harry took his elbow to keep him immediately leaving. He seemed remarkably happy to leave his own party, though people might soon miss the guest of honor. "Hey, you still haven't actually *said* congratulations..."

"And I won't," Draco said, "Not yet."

"You look..." Harry's eyes went up and down Draco, the air growing heavier between them. "You're wearing red. You never wear red. Is that for... for me, or..."

"As a matter of fact," Draco drawled, "I had been hoping it might placate this unreasonable woman into admitting me to the festivities." He jerked a thumb towards the slumbering Fat Lady. "But she proved *stubborn*. So here I am, dressed as a clown with no results..."

"It suits you, though," Harry said, biting his lip. "I mean, everything suits you, but..."

Draco reached out and felt at Harry's right hand. "And this suits *you.* You wore the rose. My favor." Harry squeezed Draco's hand with a show of surging affection that almost put... questions in Draco's mind, but there was nothing to question. He wanted to be near Harry, and that was what he was doing. Getting Harry as close as he needed...

"Clearly," Draco went on, "That's what gave you all the luck, and really, *I'm* the one who should be accepting all the congratulations... but since it's your name on the trophy, Harry, and not that cave troll Diggory's, I will have to, at some point, acknowledge you might not have done *awfully.*"

"Thanks?" Harry was staring at him with adoration so naked in his eyes, it hurt.

"But not yet," Draco said, licking his lips, "Champion," and leaned forward to whisper in Harry's ear, "I want to congratulate you in private, alright? So get away from all your admirers whenever you can, and meet me alone." Draco let his parted lips graze the cartilage of Harry's ear, voice going lower and softer, as he added, "At the Astronomy Tower."

"The Astronomy Tower?" Harry gasped, pulling back astonished, eyes huge with awareness of the implications of that setting, especially alone at night. Draco himself knew the Astronomy Tower to be an awful place, but that voice in his head said it was perfect for what he had to do. He would have to keep it together, because he had no choice... "Draco, do you mean-"

"I'm not saying anything, Harry," Draco said nonchalantly, dangling the bait and then pulling back skillfully. He stepped away and watched Harry almost shudder from the loss of the proximity, real need coming to life consciously in those innocent eyes for the first time. "I'm just saying I'll be waiting for you there. All night if I have to. I don't have anywhere else," he intoned, lingering on the last words, with a memory of Lockhart writing the same to his godfather, years ago- but thinking of his godfather put too many doubts in his head, so he pushed the image of Severus away. "*Anywhere*, that I'd rather be. But you have to bring the trophy."

"The Triwizard Cup?" Harry asked, frowning. "Everyone's been passing it around..."

"And I want my own chance to see it," Draco said softly, "Champion," and pressed a kiss to Harry's cheek. "See, you might, maybe, just a little, finally... have *impressed* me. Just a little bit. But I think I'll have to see your name engraved there up close to believe it fully. Harry James Potter," he mused, and gave Harry a last soft, half-lidded look through his light blond eyelashes before departing. "Bring it to the Tower. And don't you dare tell anyone where you're going."

Draco's steps took him right to the Astronomy Tower, where images assaulted him as usual of Dumbledore falling, but something in the warmth in his limbs put them at a distance. They no longer seemed to matter, compared to who would hopefully soon be coming.

Something was prickling again at the back of his contended mind, the voice trying to come back to life, but it was halted when he imagined Harry stepping into the tower, having left all his friends and fame and glory to be alone with Draco Malfoy. There was no part of him that kept questioning then, because he wanted to see Harry, wanted to be selfish. He wanted to be

the center of Harry's world for one night. He wanted to give Harry everything he had ever wanted. He wanted to *take*. He closed his eyes, imagining those green eyes going dazed in pleasure, staring down at him as he...

"Draco!" Harry called, and then he had strode with just as much elated determination into the tower as out of the maze. The cup was just as dazzling in his hands, and there was no artificial golden light to halo him, only the radiance that shone out of him naturally, that aura of power that never left him no matter how much Draco bent him to his will. There could never be any fear to this tower with Harry here. Wherever Harry was, that was where Draco belonged.

"You brought it," Draco said, and made a show of examining the engraving. "Yeah, your name definitely looks better there than Diggory's. Or the others. It's good, isn't it," he said, with a softer awareness of where Harry's mind was going, staring at it, "If you look at it like this."

He put down his finger over the *Harry*, and it just said *James Potter*. Harry let out a gasp, and Draco grinned at him and put a finger to his lips. "You won it for them too. And somewhere, you know they're proud of you, don't you, Harry?"

"I hope so," Harry said, eyes going wide in wonder, and then his eyes focused on Draco's face, a different longing returning to the forefront. "So, uh, are you going to... you said, um, congratulate me, or..."

"Sit with me," said Draco, and could tell Harry took that as a good sign. Maybe with a sharper mind, Harry would have noticed that Draco didn't bother conjuring or summoning pillows like he usually would. Draco didn't intend for him to stay there for long.

"Okay," said Harry, and sat down beside Draco on the hard black stone, putting the cup in front of them. "What are we sitting for?"

"It's another surprise," Draco said, the words and actions coming into his mind as surely as if Felix Felicis was guiding him. As if they were perched on the symbol of Hecate, the balance between perfection and doom braced on either side of the hurtling wheel. "Close your eyes. You can't have your surprise unless you close them."

"Okay, I'm closing them," Harry said, pretty thick dark eyelashes sliding down over his hot cheeks. Draco admired the sharp cut of his profile from the side, before waving a hand in front of his eyes. There was no response, so Draco took the cup and put his wand to it.

"Portus," he whispered. Crouch had been at pains to explain the spell, but it was lucky that Draco had spent weeks personally practicing the Portkey-making charm to exhaustion. He'd even made one to go with the Grangers to the football World Cup final. And he'd been described the location to imagine.

But he didn't have to. He just had to undo his own spell canceling the Portkey enchantment, and it was ready. It was that easy. No one could have been better suited for the task of undoing Draco's work but Draco himself.

"Can I open my eyes yet?" Harry asked, and Draco pocketed his wand.

"Go on," Harry said, and then frowned when he saw nothing different. "What is it?"

"You're going to have to feel the cup to see," said Draco. Harry ran his fingers over the engraving of his own name, but nothing happened. The sight of his hands going where Draco ordered them was sweet. Everything about Harry was naive and sweet, and Draco adored him, inside and out, adored him senselessly. He wanted Harry to be his forever, to make all that naiveté and sweetness his own, even if he was about to take that faith and taint it forever. But at least if someone was going to ruin Harry Potter, Draco would be the one to ruin him...

"Is it something to do with my father?" Harry asked trustingly, and Draco remembered. The Naufragiam, of course. It had bound Harry to Hogwarts. No one knew that but Draco and Luna. And Draco didn't know how to get past it, whether it was even possible. But he could try. It might be, for the hand that had made the potion. He had to, even if it took him along. Crouch must have anticipated that as a possibility, with the orders he had given him for after the Portkey...

"No," Draco said, taking Harry's hands. "This is about you, Harry. Everything has always been about you." He kissed Harry's hands, back and front in turn, then laid them on the cup, and laid both of his own on it beside them. "Don't worry, Harry. We're going to be together," he said, and smiled as he felt the wrenching of a Portkey beginning to work, pulling inwards.

But Harry was not being pulled by the Portkey with him- staring at him trustingly still-

"Close your eyes," Draco ordered, and once again, Harry did. With no idea if it would work, Draco leaned forward and pressed his lips against Harry Potter's for the very first time.

They were very soft, and sweaty and nervous, stiff beneath Draco's. And then Harry sighed, parted his lips, and let Draco press a full kiss to them with all the sweetness in the world, as the Portkey spun them around as they kissed and turned the world inside out and took them to the graveyard.

Frankenstein

Chapter Notes

> Hi all! Thanks so much for all your thoughts and comments! As for why the Portkey worked inside Hogwarts, a Portkey works to take Harry and the Weasleys from inside Hogwarts to Grimmauld in Order of the Phoenix, so... -shrugs- Also, fixed about the necklace, thanks! :)
>
> Anyway, enjoy! <3
>
> Playlist

The Triwizard Cup fell from their hands as they hit the ground. Harry fell onto Draco, hands grasping at the silk of his shirt, slipping. "What- what was that?"

"Stop thinking," Draco whispered, "Just kiss me," and Harry did with a moan, leaning forward and capturing Draco's mouth against his with all the ferocity of a wild beast. Draco tried to pull them to their feet. Harry just pushed him back and licked inside his mouth. He had clearly never kissed anyone before. Draco slid his tongue along Harry's, trying to coax him slower, to calm him. Harry moaned louder, hands sliding down Draco's body, down to his hips. They pressed him backwards, leaning his weight against Draco, until Draco felt his back hit cold stone.

"I love you," Harry gasped against his mouth, and kept kissing him like the world had not just begun ending.

Everything around them was eerily silent. Harry's muffled gasps against Draco's mouth echoed in the chilled air, the damp profaned feeling of the night around them not seeming to touch Harry and his warmth. Inside and outside of Draco was warm as he let Harry press him back, press him down, even against a gravestone-

Harry leaned closer, pressing another of an endless series of hard eager kisses to Draco's unresisting lips, and then his hand hit the marble behind Draco. It must have felt too cold and mossy to be the Astronomy Tower, because he finally pulled back. "What- Draco, where are we?"

"I don't know," Draco said, blinking dazedly, and stared at Harry's mouth before looking up. It was the graveyard Crouch had described, with a Muggle church in the distance behind a yew tree that loomed in silhouette against the sky, as foreboding as any tower. There was a house somewhere in the distant hills, but the graves and the trees and the church were the only things near them in the world. The graves seemed to rise from the earth only as Draco looked at them each for the first time, ascending into the waiting mist like dark creatures

gathering to encircle. He grabbed Harry's shoulders, preventing him from leaving. "Harry, I don't know- I don't think- we shouldn't-"

He couldn't think, as the warmth in his mind seemed to give way to the sentinels of the gravestones judging them. Harry drew his wand, stepping between Draco and the rest of the world. "Don't worry, Draco, I'll protect you. Did that- did that feel like a Portkey to you?"

"Yeah," Draco said faintly, feeling as if he shouldn't admit it. But he said it, and Harry's vow almost made the gold haze come back until he slipped, stepping away from the gravestone. He cried out when he grabbed it and saw the letters before him in the moonlight: TOM RIDDLE.

"Draco!" Harry said, pulling him up, and suddenly, Draco had the feeling someone was watching them. He could see Luna's Boggart from this morning in his mind's eye, climbing out of the grave to drag Harry down into it with him.

"Someone's coming!" Harry snapped, and drew his wand. "Draw your wand, Draco!" But Draco didn't, staring at the silhouette. It was a short stout one with something in its arms, flanked dimly by the night mist, the negative of the figure Harry had struck emerging from the maze bathed in gold. This figure made the dread in the air deepen like a screw being turned with each inexorable step. Harry's wand raised to it seemed only right, but Draco couldn't.

"I didn't bring my wand," Draco lied, though if Harry had looked down, he could have seen the bend of the talon wand in his pocket. "Harry, give it to me."

"What? Why?" Harry asked, and looked between Draco and the figure in fear, but none of the freezing that Draco tended to have around danger. Even this far past midnight, he was still alert and ready to face any threat. Unless he handed his wand over, willingly.

"Harry, I'm the better duelist," Draco insisted, and then with more urgency, "And I know how to Apparate, come on, I can get us out of here, wherever we are."

Harry pressed his wand into Draco's hand. "Okay. Come on, Draco, do it, let's go..."

And the ghost of the thought of doing so passed through his mind, before the package in the arms of the figure passed under a beam of moonlight, and it became visible it was something like a baby. A baby carried by a man in the hooded robes of a Death Eater.

Obey every order from a Death Eater or the Dark Lord.

The voice in his head reminded him of that, at the repulsive sight of Wormtail, short and homely. His once-full frame was more sunken and unhealthy-looking and diminutive than ever, bearing hideous cargo in his arms. "Harry," Draco gasped, and the thought to Apparate came from the back of his mind, like a fleeting prayer.

But Harry was no longer in his reach. He had crumpled to the ground, screaming at the top of his lungs in agony. His fingers groped dazed at his own scar, clutching at it like Ron had

described in the dream of Voldemort during Divination. The presence of the enemy had come upon them.

For the stupidest moment of Draco's life, he wondered if Voldemort was on the back of Wormtail's head.

"Malfoy," Wormtail gasped in fear, "Draco Malfoy," and raised his wand, but Draco got on his own knees before Wormtail, laying down his wand.

Obey every order from a Death Eater or the Dark Lord. Tell them you brought Potter to them.

"I am at your service, Mr. Pettigrew," Draco told him. "Tell me how we will proceed."

A high, cold voice came from the bundle in Wormtail's arms. "This is Lucius's son?"

"I have brought the Potter boy," Draco said, "As an offering," and remained on his knees.

That high voice began to laugh shrilly. "Then show me my offering, boy," he commanded, and Draco rose from his feet and hauled a dazed Harry up from his knees. Harry's eyes went not to the man or the eerie laughing voice before him, but to Draco's face beside him, Draco who he had walked through fire from trusting so much.

"Draco?" he said blankly, huge, beautiful green eyes still not so much as suspecting betrayal.

"Put him on the grave," the high voice ordered, "And help Wormtail tie him to it."

"Incarcerous," Draco cast with the talon wand. The cords shot out and secured Harry all around, wrists, ankles, middle, and neck, just like he had learned from Sirius. Harry focused on him then, eyes for nothing but Draco, even when he heard the name Wormtail, until Wormtail pushed Draco aside and finished securing the bonds himself.

"You?" Harry gasped, and then looked between them with a start. "It's Wormtail! Draco, help me!" He began to struggle, and Wormtail struck him across the face with a grubby four-fingered hand. It did not seem right for anyone to strike that innocent face, let alone such scum, but Wormtail was a Death Eater, and Draco had to obey him. It was the right thing to do.

Wormtail set about checking the tightness of the ropes by hand. With an impatient sigh, Draco flicked Harry's wand and tightened them magically. "He can't move now," Draco said, "Try him," and Harry let out a scream.

"You- Draco, you-" he stammered, the horrible understanding threatening his face. "Draco, you- you- why are you helping him- it's Wormtail, Draco, why are you *tying* me-"

"I'm sorry, Harry," Draco said blankly. "I have to obey him."

"WHAT?" Harry screamed, thrashing in his bonds. "No, Draco, what are you doing? You're not like this! You're not on their side! Please, please say you're not- *Draco*-"

"Silence him," said Wormtail, with a glance that showed he had not forgotten Draco's attempt to kill him. But with an effortless wave of his wand, Draco extended one of the ropes to slide across Harry's face, and gag him in a monstrous parody of a caress.

Once Harry was secured, Wormtail turned down towards the bundle on the ground, which was moving, looking unhappy to have been discarded. The high hissing voice from it cooed out, "Young Malfoy... your name is Draco?"

"Yes," Draco said. Without knowing why, his steps took him closer to the bundle, only for something to hiss closer to his feet.

It was Nagini, and Draco screamed at the top of his lungs, jumping back. Harry's wand was shoved quickly in his pocket. He brandished the talon wand. His mind filled with nothing but panicked repetitions of Nagini's name. But Nagini was not lunging for Draco, nor pouncing on any other creature to devour. She was just circling the foot of Riddle's gravestone, where Harry was secured. Draco held his wand pointed at Nagini, staring with a paralysis overwhelming him, turning every bone in his body one by one to lead...

"Calm down," Wormtail snapped, slimy eyes going between Draco and the bundle. "It's the Dark Lord's snake. She would never disobey him. She is a faithful creature."

"Nagini..." the bundle cooed, and Draco knew what was inside the black swaddling cloth.

"Get the basin," Wormtail obeyed, and Draco's hand put the wand away for him. His eyes swept around, searching, and then followed Wormtail's gaze towards a stone cauldron large enough for almost anything to be sacrificed in its ritual. If they had needed to put not just Harry's blood but his body in whole, to make the Naufragiam, he and Luna could have managed with that cauldron...

Draco stared down at it uncomprehending as his arms pushed the heavy thing over the ground, making its slow way over the filthy wet earth. He hoped that Harry would not be ending up in that cauldron. Though he would be if Wormtail and Voldemort said he should be.

"You're a steady hand at a potion, Malfoy," Wormtail said, with the knowledge of a rat who had spent two and a half years watching his owner get help at cramming for Potions exams. "Follow my instructions. We must not fail at the ritual."

Oh. Another surprise blood magic ritual. In another graveyard, no less. These things did seem bound to just happen to him.

"Incendio," Draco cast, setting a fire beneath the cauldron, which already had the other ingredients prepared. He watched it, wand poised, and made the flame go hotter and colder to accommodate what Wormtail told him was meant to be a quick boil. After so many extra sessions with his godfather, he could make these small adjustments in his sleep.

He knew already that Harry's blood would be an ingredient in this, just like the Naufragiam, and- Wormtail's hand, maybe? He didn't know where that idea had come from, or what was going on in his head. The only voices that made any sense were those of Wormtail and

Voldemort telling him what to do. Without those to guide his actions, the gold haze buoying him up would drop and he would plummet down into the graves-

"Is it supposed to have this consistency?" Draco asked, once it began to gain a scintillating diamond quality on its surface. "The moonlight is catching on it. I've read of some potions where that sheen is the signature of successful completion..."

Harry's eyes caught his attention, the only part of Harry that could still move or attempt communication. There was betrayal in them, but Draco didn't want to look, didn't want to see it. He ignored those death-green eyes and focused on his duty.

"It is ready, master," said Wormtail.

"Now..." said the voice of Voldemort, and Wormtail let Voldemort out of his little bundle. Draco was forced to look at Harry then, by the muffled sound of that scream drew from him. He followed Harry's gaze and could understood why he had screamed. It looked like the Dark Lord Draco remembered from the Manor, but small, more hideous and malformed than even the noseless monster from the blue loop. Instead of pearly white, its flesh was a dark red, but not the elegant, smooth pomegranate color of Naufragiam. It was the ugliest kind of wound, like hard red clay pulled from tainted earth.

It was more like a house elf than human, but with none of the cuteness, with the thin weak spindly arms and legs reptilian. Instead of huge floating earnest marble eyes, these were a red snake's, Voldemort's eyes. It was monstrous, how different this thing had become from Luna's Boggart. Draco wanted to scream and found he could not even do that. It was like he had snuck his way into the deepest, foulest depths of someone's soul and pried out the nastiest bit of ugliness hidden there- made flesh in the abomination that remained, of what had once been the handsomest boy Draco had ever seen other than Harry Potter. Luna had once said Riddle and Harry looked alike.

Wormtail looked just as repulsed as Draco, though *he* should be used to the thing. He couldn't keep it off his face as he carried his nightmare cargo to the boiling cauldron. He looked more frightened of it too than he had even been of Sirius. The thought of what Wormtail had done to Uncle Sirius, made a voice in Draco's head say *No*, weak and indistinct. Draco fell to a heap on the ground, staring with complete impotence as Wormtail lowered Voldemort into the potion Draco had heated for him.

I'm Sirius Black's nephew, and I'm helping the man who stole his life from him. I'm Severus Snape's godson, and I'm helping the man and the snake who are going to murder him. This is Harry Potter I'm leading to be bled for these demons, when Harry is the one that I- that I-

Voldemort's body disappeared beneath the diamond surface of the potion, and Draco began to laugh hysterically at the sight of the malformed red shape disintegrating inside. It looked like the Witch's Ganglion put into the tincture mixture for the Naufragiam. If only the Ganglion had dissolved half so quickly, Draco's arm wouldn't have hurt so much from stirring...

Draco didn't know what was going on his head, as the bliss was gold and yet as rotten a clay-red as in the cauldron, self split in two as he laughed, Harry's eyes trained not on the

abomination below but the laughing Malfoy, face wracked even now in not hatred but doubt...

"Stop laughing!" Wormtail snapped, and the laugh died in Draco's throat like some kind of Langlock. Draco had never witnessed anyone perform a dark ritual with less gravitas. He remembered Luna's prayer to Hecate, but stayed silent as told as Wormtail raised his wand and called out, "Bone of the father, unknowingly given, you will renew your son!"

Draco had to leap out of the way as the grave moved. For a terrified moment, Draco thought something was about to climb out of the earth beneath him just as envisioned, swallow him as a voice somewhere said he deserved. And the dead that were rising were not coming for Draco. It was fine dust from the earth, dust from bones, that simmered up like snow falling in reverse and floated hypnotized to the surface of the cauldron, towards the red pulp. Draco climbed to his hands and knees, thinking of Periander's ritual with Maledictum's corpse. It was like that in reverse, except something more evil, with that bright electric venom-blue the liquid took on, the color of half a dozen species of poisonous snakes.

Here came the one part Draco had been looking forward to in every part of his head, the consolation. A whimpering Wormtail pulled out a dagger, far less impressive than Periander's moonstone one, and could only stutter out the words, "Flesh- of the servant- w-willingly given- you will- revive- your master."

Draco was grateful from that wording that Wormtail hadn't elected to try and use Draco instead, but maybe the willing part would have been too much of a stretch. It seemed too much for Wormtail, too, as only fear seemed to be moving this least Gryffindor of them all. Draco could not believe Neville had felt himself unworthy of that name, compared to this cringing, half-human creature, who sliced off his own hand at the wrist with an agonized cry, not out of courage but of rank cowardice, for what awaited him should he not complete the mutilation.

Draco saw Harry close his eyes and try not to see. He was still so innocent it burned at Draco's insides, burned like the vivid red of the cauldron, the same red that appeared at the deepest, densest parts of Fiendfyre. Draco didn't want to look either, but he had to understand. And Harry looked too soon enough, as Wormtail climbed back up to the grave with surprising strength, before sagging back with a pained grab at his new stump. "Draco... Draco, take this knife... cut him, Draco, cut him for me... his blood in the cauldron..."

Harry screamed something inaudible through the gag, but Draco took the knife from Wormtail's hand and then a vial before approaching Harry. Draco had taken blood willingly from Harry once, but Harry struggled with everything in him now. It was useless, of course. It wasn't necessary, but to be sure he didn't cut any more than he had to, he raised his wand and tightened the ropes infinitesimally more. Then he took Harry's hand. For a second, he couldn't help but trace his fingers over it, their fingertips sliding together like they had so many times, the hand that had just grasped at his waist with such hunger. Now it was shaking helplessly beneath Draco's touch.

Draco didn't want to do it, but he did, and the gold warm calm rewarded him swimming back once he had sliced Harry's palm and dripped the blood into the vial. As he cut, Wormtail recited, "Blood of the enemy, forcibly taken... you will resurrect your foe."

Draco climbed down, not looking back, and handed Wormtail the vial and the knife back. Wormtail poured the vial into the cauldron, which turned a brilliant white. There it was, the pearly white of the serpentine man-sized form that Draco had been expecting, that he pictured the red pulp morphing into. But he didn't have the chance to watch, as Wormtail had fallen beside the cauldron. He was holding his stump as if that could cure it, and called out, "Malfoy! Help me! The pain..."

And so as the potion sparked and exploded in whiteness behind them before going still, Draco was crouched down with Wormtail, trying to figure out a healing spell to solve a severed hand. "No," Wormtail whimpered, "Do not heal it, boy, only... the pain, the pain, it's too much..."

"You're disgusting," Draco said flatly, and Wormtail's beady eyes flared in agonized rage.

"We're no different," he said, and behind them, steam filled the air, a white mist cold as Dementors- no, it was colder, and Wormtail was turning to stare with nothing but horror on his face for what he had done, as Voldemort climbed out from the cauldron. He was thinner than Draco remembered, a mere skeleton, a house elf mated with Nagini and bleached albino-white, nose gone, only slits in its place, voice high and still colder than Dementors as he ordered Wormtail to robe him.

Wormtail did with his one good hand, having gotten nothing out of Draco to help with the pain. *Good,* said a weak voice in Draco, though most of him was cringing at his inability to obey a Death Eater, like he knew he was supposed to. But it was good to see Wormtail suffer. He wanted the whole world to suffer for whatever this was, whatever was left of Draco before he could climb down gratefully under the ground where it would be warm...

Harry made a muffled sound. Draco could see him staring at the Dark Lord returned, the man who had killed Harry's parents, who had put that scar on his forehead, the scar Draco had affectionately poked so many times. It had to be burning again. But he wasn't cringing, wasn't crying. Behind his gag, he didn't look afraid, just angry. Draco had never seen anything so brave.

When it was all done, Draco hoped Harry would be the one to kill him for this.

Voldemort was as revolting a thing to behold as always, a monster that Draco had dreamed of never having to see again, much less helping to make. *Frankenstein*, it hit him with a hysterical laugh, *I am, I'm Frankenstein, I'm Doctor Frankenstein.* Draco had always said it would be possible with magic, hadn't he, what was done in that Muggle film the Grangers showed him? Hermione's voice came through his head, calling him Frankenstein time after time, exasperated, fond, so full of love and trust, and there it was. Severed limbs and blood all mixed together, grave-robbing in the dead of night just like Frankenstein, and here was Frankenstein's monster.

Frankenstein's monster was inspecting his skeletal scaled hands with satisfaction, but Draco's laughter turned his gaze directly to him for the first time. In the red line, that was. In the blue loop, he had not seen those red eyes train on him like that before the day he had the Dark Mark burned onto his wrist. An awful, wet, scaly presence pressed against his mind then, just like on that day. But this time, even trying to bring them *down* to be obedient to his lord, his

shields held. All the snake's undulation inside his head did was slide off the impervious obsidian surface of his mind's knife.

"Draco Malfoy," Voldemort hissed, slithering out of his mind with Nagini slithering at the foot of the grave around Harry as if waiting to devour, always eager to be fed, that snake, that awful voice, as a wave of Voldemort's hand sent Wormtail flying pinned to the gravestone beside Harry. "Draco... *Lucius*... Malfoy. I have heard so very, very much about *you*..."

And Voldemort came forward to touch him. "It is *gratifying* to have a body again." Voldemort's fingers reached out and stroked through Draco's hair, scales catching against Draco's cheek. "What a hard gleaming surface your mind wears. You remind me, little Malfoy, of your aunt Bellatrix... kiss my hand, pretty one..."

Draco tried to struggle back from the command, but eventually his head bowed and pressed a kiss to the back of that bone-white hand. He felt he might be sick. Voldemort's smirk burned into his face as he straightened up, and then that smirk went lower.

"So like your father, and yet so unlike," Voldemort said softly, with an interest there that had never appeared in the blue loop, a look in his eyes like Tom Riddle had worn for Draco in the Chamber of Secrets. Voldemort seemed taken with Draco's long hair, awful long fingernails curling through the pale strands. "So clever and yet so yielding... how lovely to have a body, and touch things of beauty again..."

Draco didn't know what Voldemort might have done then, if Wormtail's craven shriek hadn't drawn both their attention. "My Lord!" he screamed twice, and then more humbly when Voldemort strode over to him, Draco remaining where he stood uncertainly. "My Lord..." Wormtail simpered repulsively. "My Lord... you promised... you did promise..."

"Hold out your arm," said Voldemort lazily. Draco remembered the silver hand Wormtail had gotten for himself, the silver hand they had found him strangled by in the Manor cellars after Harry's brief confinement there. He remembered wondering why, even back then, if Wormtail had to turn traitor, he couldn't have done it far sooner.

One could hardly see why Wormtail would not have turned sooner than he had, however much a coward he was, with the way Voldemort mocked his mutilation. "Oh, master... thank you, master," he whined, holding out his stump, but it didn't seem like Voldemort, to waste time in his own triumph in order to help so low a creature. And Voldemort just let out a shrill mocking laugh.

"The other arm."

The Dark Mark. Draco should have known. He glanced reflexively towards his own left forearm, before remembering he didn't have one. *Not- not yet?*

"Master, please... please..."

Voldemort got out Wormtail's Dark Mark, which he showed far more interest in than Wormtail's sobs. "It is back," Voldemort said softly, "They will all have noticed it... and now, we shall see... now we shall know..."

Severus had shown Draco his, but not this recently. It had not looked nearly as lurid and grotesque as Wormtail's. Although that might have something to do with the owner.

But Voldemort stopped before using the Mark to summon his followers, as Draco had expected. Instead, he turned to train his gaze on Draco again, red eyes seeking once again their way behind his shields and only leaving slime along the blade.

"Draco Malfoy," Voldemort said again, and Draco had hoped he would never again have to hear that hissing, freakish voice pronounce those syllables. The fingers of that awful slimy pebble-jointed hand snaked along to take Draco's chin, tilting it up towards him as he licked his lips with his forked tongue. "I have been told by my *faithful* servant..." His eyes dropped to Wormtail contemptuously, before returning to Draco with that same awful hunger. "That you are a blood traitor. A friend to Mudbloods, to Harry Potter. And yet you assisted. You delivered the boy to me. And you are so perfectly respectful. Why?"

"I am loyal to Death Eaters," Draco said, the answer forced out of him. "I am loyal to you, my lord. I follow your orders."

"Oh, but you fear me, do you not?" Voldemort purred. "Well you should, little one. Were you not your father's son, I would have ordered you killed as the spare, had you struck dead where you stood. But you may serve more use for me yet. Oh, we shall see..."

He pulled away and pressed his long, white forefinger to Wormtail's Dark Mark. Harry convulsed behind them, but with him gagged, Wormtail was the only one screaming. Draco could see on Voldemort's face that he enjoyed the power, to once again be the one directly causing someone to scream.

Voldemort surveyed his father's graveyard like a newly founded kingdom. "How many will be brave enough to return when they feel it?" he whispered, and Draco thought of his own father with a flash of new terror, not sure whether he was more frightened for him to come or not. "And how many will be foolish enough to stay away?" Who would Draco watch die first, Harry or Father?

Voldemort began to pace, as if he too was not immune to that common human anxiety about whether anyone would show up when you threw a party. Draco watched him mutely, only to tense when Voldemort's pacing landed him close to Harry. He stood there smirking sadistically in his face, as if determined the Boy Who Lived understand his defeat, and suffer the full pain of it before Voldemort ended him.

"You stand, Harry Potter, upon the remains of my late father," Voldemort hissed, with Draco approaching cautiously, straining to hear. "A Muggle and a fool... very like your dear mother. But they both had their uses, did they not? Your mother died to defend you as a child... and I killed my father, and see how useful he has proved himself, in death..."

If Harry's wand hadn't been in Draco's pocket, Draco was sure Harry would have given Voldemort cause to regret speaking of his mother. But he couldn't even say anything back. Draco had gagged him too well.

Voldemort began to reminisce as they waited, Nagini following him about like a charmed snake. For a mad moment, Draco imagined if Harry were free to speak, he could order Nagini to attack Voldemort... but Draco was not on Harry's side anymore. Everything would be better if he could just stop thinking, except-

Harry wasn't paying attention to Voldemort's monologuing. Instead, his gaze had strayed back to Draco, with huge mournful eyes full of only one question: *Why?*

"Oh, Harry Potter, have I failed to capture your interest? You look so betrayed. Not by me, but by your former friend..." Voldemort did sound more like Tom Riddle in the Chamber of Secrets as he laughed in the face of Harry's devastation. "What is it *you* find so fascinating about the son of a mediocre man like Lucius Malfoy? Lucius served me well, when serving was convenient... and abandoned me just as quickly, telling tales of the Imperius curse. Is his son truly cut of a different cloth, for *the* Harry Potter to be so wounded by his abandonment?"

Voldemort turned his gaze to Draco, his perusal given new bite by his awareness that Draco meant something to Harry. "Amuse me, little one. Answer my questions, Draco. Your full name is Draco Lucius Malfoy?" Draco nodded. "And you are fifteen?"

"Yes, my lord."

"And you are the one who brought Harry Potter to me."

"Yes, my lord."

"And where is the boy's wand?"

"I have it, my lord."

"Give it to me," said Voldemort, and Draco handed it over. He suppressed a shiver as his palm brushed *that*. "How did you get his wand?"

"He gave it to me," Draco answered, the words coming out more blankly each time.

"And why," Voldemort said, sadism looking better satisfied by the details of this betrayal inflicted on his enemy, "Would the Boy Who Lived have done that?"

"Because I asked him to."

And then there were cracks in the air, popping sounds from all about as the call of the Dark Lord bore its fruit.

"Stand at my side, little one," Voldemort said calmly. Draco stared out bleakly at the sea of hooded, masked wizards, reflecting how in the blue loop, he had gotten one of those hooded robes, but never actually a mask. The easiest figure to pick out, despite being masked, was the stooped elderly figure of Theo's father, Cantankerous Nott. And near him, Draco could also immediately pick out the figure of Father, whose mask had remained in Malfoy Manor unused for so many years.

It had been kept in Father's room, in the back of his closet, years before the Dark Lord had ever returned. Draco had bullied one of house elves into showing it to him when he was eight or nine. He'd ran around in front of the mirrors, trying it on, playing at being the dark wizard. He remembered leaving a small tear near one of the narrow holes of the eye of Father's. It made it easy to recognize it even before Father fell to his knees, crawling on the dirty ground, and kissed the disgusting hem of those disgusting robes.

When Draco liked to call Father 'Voldemort's preeminent bootlicker' in his mind, he had never thought of the expression so literally.

The stares of disbelief were not just for the Dark Lord. Many were for Harry Potter and Wormtail, famous, and famously dead and gone, and then for the one person in the graveyard not dressed in flowing black robes, whose bright hair made him unmistakable as a Malfoy.

"Draco?" Father said as he got up, voice coming out of that mask in pure horror. Draco couldn't tell if it was fear for Draco, that he might be hurt by the Dark Lord, or fear *of* him, that his willful son might jeopardize everything. But whatever his fear, it didn't keep him from whispering *Master* to Voldemort in some perverse mockery of worship, before he seemed to sense him tiring of his obeisance and scrambled into place in the circle of Death Eaters forming around the grave.

It wasn't everyone, not by a long shot. Compared to the numbers that would come and go at the Manor, it was a paltry showing. Draco didn't think Severus was amongst them, not yet. Severus would have to discuss with Dumbledore whether he should go, before eventually deciding he should go over and become a spy again.

If they asked Draco if Severus was loyal, he would have to tell them the truth-

If he could just be silent and obey, and maybe he wouldn't have to say. Maybe he wouldn't even have to hurt Harry again...

"Welcome, Death Eaters," said Voldemort quietly. "Thirteen years... thirteen years since last we met. Yet you answer my call as though it was yesterday... We are still united under the Dark Mark, then! Or are we?"

One of the worst things about the albino was the infernal penchant for campy dramatics.

He sniffed the air, saying, "I smell guilt. There is a stench of guilt upon the air," and some part of Draco's mind, from the security of lack of choice, reflected that if *he* was the Dark Lord rising in this graveyard, he would have come up with much better lines. Again, he remembered Luna's prayer to Hecate. There was no comparison, even if the potion hadn't worked in the end.

It made the Death Eaters afraid, though, because the fear of death was what really filled the air. Guilt was nowhere- shame, perhaps, as much towards themselves as Voldemort, for having come running right back to a man who no longer deserved the name, a man who this belated, incomplete show of loyalty towards could prove to have been such a miscalculation. A man who was using Harry bloody Potter as a prop in his one-man graveyard show.

"I see you all, whole and healthy, with your powers intact- such prompt appearances!- and I ask myself... why did this band of wizards never come to the aid of their master, to whom they swore eternal loyalty?"

At least these idiots had the intelligence not to answer what was clearly a rhetorical question. Given the state of the one 'faithful' member of their lot, Wormtail, who was carrying on his less eloquent, but rather more effective rival one-man show, rolling about in that inexhaustible agony of his, it was self-evident why none of them had rushed back to staking their lives on Snake Boy.

"And I answer myself, they must have believed me broken, they thought I was gone. They slipped back among my enemies, and they pleaded innocence, and ignorance, and bewitchment..."

That last part was for Father, among others. The masked figure that Draco knew was him managed to avoid visibly flinching, but his shame radiated out then, and that *was* a smell.

"And then I ask myself, but how could they have believed I would not rise again? They, who knew the steps I took, long ago, to guard myself against mortal death? They, who had seen proofs of the immensity of my power, in the times when I was mightier than any wizard living?

"And I answer myself, perhaps they believed a still-greater power could exist, one that could vanquish even Lord Voldemort... perhaps they now pay allegiance to another... perhaps that champion of commoners, of Mudbloods and Muggles, Albus Dumbledore?"

Voldemort really did hate Dumbledore. Draco remembered the reaction of Tom Riddle to that name back in the Chamber of Secrets, especially when Harry said that Dumbledore was more powerful than him. And even now, Draco thought Dumbledore was.

Draco had said once that he was more afraid of Dumbledore than Voldemort. And, he found inside himself, that was still true.

The Death Eaters once again had the good sense to react as they should, this time with the obligatory show of disapproval and head-shaking, like some planned call-and-response.

"It is a disappointment to me... I confess myself disappointed..."

Some extra-special idiot had the bright idea to try and draw some attention to himself. Draco didn't recognize him as he threw himself to Voldemort's feet- if you were going to do that, Father had at least been smart enough to do it right at the start, rather than at a prime making-an-example-of-you juncture- and began to beg mercy. "Master! Master, forgive me! Forgive us all!"

Voldemort laughed, lifted his wand, and called out with a voice that sounded like it had waited with bated breath, each and every day without a body, to cast this curse again. "Crucio!"

He didn't hold it for long. It was almost disappointing. That hadn't vented nearly enough rage. There would be a lot more self-aggrandizement through senseless torture before he had his fill.

"Get up, Avery. Stand up. You ask for forgiveness? I do not forgive. I do not forget. Thirteen long years... I want thirteen years' repayment before I forgive you. Wormtail here has paid some of his debt already, have you not, Wormtail?"

Some of his debt? Bloody hell, a voice like Ron asked in Draco's head, what more did he want the man to chop off for him?

"You returned to me, not out of loyalty, but out of fear of your old friends. You deserve this pain, Wormtail. You know that, don't you?"

"Yes, master... please, master... please..." Wormtail was moaning and writhing, to the point it was a miracle he hadn't passed out already from the pain. If Draco was him, he might have just cut his losses, turned to his Animagus form, and hightailed it out of there, three-footed rat on the go.

"Yet you helped return me to my body," Voldemort said, with a tone that showed exactly how little he valued that show of loyalty. "Worthless and traitorous as you are, you helped me... and Lord Voldemort rewards his helpers..."

Draco's attention drifted then, as the ritual of Voldemort making Wormtail his silver hand began, with all of the ceremonial show of magic and bowing and scraping and pitifulness. No doubt it was fascinating to the Death Eaters, but Draco knew what the end result would look like. What he didn't know the end of was Harry Potter, who was tied there almost forgotten. Draco stared at that pale still frame and saw those green eyes not dazed or hopeless, but rational, listening and registering everything going on. Those eyes had not given up.

Finally, Wormtail rejoined the circle, where everyone seemed to have their ordained places, like a school classroom with assigned seats. And they had left gaps like good schoolchildren for their missing classmates. Voldemort's eyes went from Wormtail to one of those gaps, bypassing Father entirely, quite a bad sign. It made Father shudder. Just a tremor for a moment, in the wand hand.

"The Lestranges should stand here," Voldemort said, with affection in his voice for the missing couple. The image of Aunt Bella- had it only been that morning he had seen her Boggart?- seemed to fill the air, ghostly, behind Father, her and Uncle Rodolphus as spectral presences. "But they are entombed in Azkaban. They were faithful. They went to Azkaban rather than renounce me... when Azkaban is broken open, the Lestranges will be honored beyond their dreams. The Dementors will join us... they are our natural allies... we will recall the banished giants... I shall have all my devoted servants returned to me, and an army of creatures whom all fear..."

Now Draco was the one suppressing a shiver. He couldn't shake right here in the middle of the circle, in lieu of having been told to go elsewhere. Everyone would see him squirm. But if Voldemort wanted to be menacing, he could hardly have hit more exactly on his subjects: Aunt Bella and Dementors coming out from Azkaban to swallow up them all.

It was a greatest hits medley from there on out, only special mentions of the most and least deserving. Only Father and Nott and Crabbe and Goyle were of any particular interest to Draco. He drifted again until Voldemort arrived at the largest gap. Try as he may to tell himself not to let any panic into this distant sardonic haze, observing a farcical set of proceedings that had nothing much in the end to do with him, he could hardly not stare at a space that represented his godfather.

"And here we have six missing Death Eaters... three dead in my service. One, too cowardly to return... he will pay. One, who I believe has left me forever... he will be killed, of course..."

That must be my godfather. Compared to the sound of Severus's death, the thought of witnessing Father die seemed inconsequential. Even a half-dead boy retained his preferences.

"And one, who remains my most faithful servant, and who has already re-entered my service."

Karkaroff? Perhaps all the Death Eaters were thinking that too as they exchanged glances. More likely Crouch, though. And there was poor Father, with Wormtail on one side and empty space on the other. Father, as any rational person would, chose to look in the direction of the empty space.

"He is at Hogwarts, that faithful servant, and it was through his efforts that our young friend arrived tonight... Yes. Harry Potter has kindly joined us for my rebirthing party. One might go so far as to call him my guest of honor."

Father was looking around, having tired of verbally conversing with imaginary invisible Aunt Bella. Then Draco saw Father squaring his shoulders, with an air of gathering his composure to try and speak. *Oh, no, don't, Father,* Draco thought intently in his direction, willing him to realize that if Voldemort had wanted him to talk, he would have bloody well acknowledged him already. No good could come of inserting himself, and yet Father did.

"Master, we crave to know... we beg you to tell us... how you have achieved this... this miracle... how you managed to return to us..."

"Ah, what a story it is, Lucius. And it begins- and ends- with my young friend here. And you will all hear of this miracle soon." Voldemort walked lazily over to stand next to Harry, with Nagini sliding around happily at their feet, as if she could sense mealtime approaching. "But," Voldemort said after a weighted pause, "He is not the only young man who helped me achieve a miracle this night. Draco Malfoy, come forward."

Draco walked over to stand beside him, avoiding Harry's gaze, and waited to be killed or tortured, preferring the idea of the killing. The tableau was complicated by Voldemort crooking out a scaly finger in Father's direction. "Oh, and Lucius as well. My... inquisitive friend. Far be it from me to stand in the way of a family reunion. Mask off, hood off. Let us all compare the father to the son, and see how far the apple falls... from the treacherous tree."

Father's steps faltered at the word treacherous, but he walked as he was told. He took off his mask and pocketed it, then threw back his hood, revealing his long head of bright white-blond hair like a beacon in the moonlight. Harry couldn't have missed him any more than a

thundering freight train. If Harry somehow escaped this, add Father to the list, after Wormtail and Draco, as the Death Eaters he would have no trouble identifying.

"Oh, my slippery friend," Voldemort sighed with theatrical woundedness. "I am told that you have not renounced the old ways, though to the world you present a respectable face. You are still ready to take the lead in a spot of Muggle-torture, I believe? Yet you never tried to find me, Lucius... your exploits at the Quidditch World Cup were fun, I daresay... but might not your energies have been better directed towards finding and aiding your master?"

"My Lord, I was constantly on the alert," Father said quickly, with that same disquieting cravenness taking possession of him. The first time Draco had seen it, it had been like a stranger had possessed his fierce father's body. Now he expected no less. "Had there been any sign from you, any whisper of your whereabouts, I would have been at your side immediately, nothing could have prevented me-"

"And yet you ran from my Mark, when a faithful Death Eater sent it into the sky last summer?" Voldemort queried, toying with him at this point. "Yes, I know all about that, Lucius... you have disappointed me... and yet you have not failed me in one thing." He waited until Lucius obliged him and asked the question.

"In... in what? In what have I pleased you, my lord?"

"Your son," Voldemort said, and put an arm around Draco's shoulders. Draco's skin wanted to crawl off his bones and go live somewhere else. "Look at this boy before your eyes, my friends! While you rested idle, living out your lives in forgetfulness, this pretty little traitor was at work luring Harry Potter to his doom! He came with Harry Potter, cut his flesh, delivered the blood, and made the potion, where Wormtail was too weak! This boy is worth more than you all!"

None of the Death Eaters seemed to like that, exchanging glances and murmurs. It didn't portend well for many of their prospects, that was for sure. It had always been Voldemort's way, praising one only to denigrate or threaten more others.

"And yet, look upon him," Voldemort sneered, turning from faux-warmth to Dementor cold in the blink of an eye. "Dressed like a filthy Muggle, with tales he has spent his years at Hogwarts spurning *your* children, consorting with Mudbloods and blood traitors... Lucius, what have you to say for allowing such behavior from your *progeny*?"

"It- it is as you said, my lord," Father stammered, clearly trying to save his own hide as much as Draco's. "He set about befriending Harry Potter to ensnare him and gain his trust- for your sake, my lord, he suffered the company of those undesirables, he went amongst their midst- tell them, Draco, tell them how you followed my plans to prepare for the day of our lord's return..."

Father was a Death Eater. And what a Death Eater said, Draco obeyed. "Yes, Father. Yes, my lord, I pretended to be their friend. And when the time came, and I received my orders, I followed them. I lured Harry Potter here, and now I stand at your service."

"You see!" Father exclaimed, ecstasy filling his eyes, as if he believed his own lies, as if his son had finally turned out to be everything he was expected to be. "Draco, you have brought pride... great pride to the name of Malfoy... my clever, clever son..."

"We *will* see," Voldemort said coldly. "Wormtail, take the Potter boy down from the headstone." Wormtail rushed to oblige, silver hand shining in the light. "Yes, smile you might, at the hand that I have bestowed upon you as blessing. Such blessings shall fall on you all... if you remain loyal. For those disloyal... I have different gifts that await. Untie the boy." Wormtail's new hand made quick work of the ropes. When Harry scrambled up, stiff rope-burned limbs not slow in moving to try to save himself, Voldemort raised his wand and called, "Crucio!"

Draco stepped away from the writhing body, something in his mind shorting out at the sight of Harry Potter, who he had been kissing what felt like seconds ago, who he had trained to duel, who he had loved since he was small- Harry Potter, tortured in front of a circle of sneering enemies in the dark, and his betrayed eyes when they could focus going to Draco above all others, Draco the one he still pleaded with for help. Draco the one who owed him more than standing there like a mannequin, watching all of the hope in the world twitch like the cave spiders in the cellars of Malfoy Manor waiting to be sliced into twitching pincers and go forever still...

The Death Eaters were laughing. It drowned out Harry's rope-muffled screams.

"And here," Voldemort said to Draco, "Is your chance to show your loyalties, little one. Keep the boy in place, Wormtail, do not let him crawl away yet to die..." Wormtail slammed Harry on the head, though he was trembling from the aftershocks of Voldemort's spell. Voldemort ended it cleanly, but he shook from it, face-down in the grave dirt. A voice came up in Draco saying *No* over and over, no matter how much the stronger voice he wanted to listen to tried to silence it.

"Who are you, Draco Malfoy? Which side are you really on, little one? You must decide, here and now. Choose the right side, the side of your blood, and you will live, your father will live, you will kneel and you will rise with the Dark Mark on your pretty wrist, and live cherished and honored in *my favor*. Choose the side of this insignificant worm," Voldemort said, one of his ghostly bare feet prodding at Harry's matted dark hair, "And die with him. What is your choice?"

Draco was silent, not sure what he was meant to choose. How was he supposed to answer the question of who he was, other than wishing to be dead if it meant Harry would not have to die...

Voldemort waited, growing more visibly impatient, and then his red eyes widened in contemptuous amusement. "Oh, Lucius. You brag of your son's loyalty? Can it be you know your own family so little, you cannot even tell when your child is under the Imperius curse?"

"No," Father breathed, looking at Draco, "Tell him you're not."

Father dragged Draco back from the prone body of Harry, with Voldemort and Wormtail stood there leering above it like twin gargoyles, alike in ugliness.

"I'm not under the Imperius curse," Draco said mechanically. It sounded so transparently forced then that all the Death Eaters laughed at Father, Wormtail with them.

"Let's try this again," Voldemort said, twirling his wand in his wand. "Go back to your father." Draco obeyed. "Now answer a question for me truthfully. Have you been placed under the Imperius curse?"

"Yes," said Draco, and heard Father let out a hard sigh beside him like he was deflating.

Laughter swelled around them, a ring of rising malediction. "What orders were you given?"

"Crouch told me to use any means necessary to get Harry Potter to meet me alone with the Triwizard Cup, activate the Portkey, and send him to the graveyard. Crouch said to obey anything he or the Dark Lord or any Death Eaters told me," Draco recited blankly.

"Do you see, Lucius?" Voldemort laughed. He was reaping ample rewards from this particular bit of theater. With Father's face unmasked, all of Voldemort's sadism could be fed by watching Father go from false confidence to panic. "One might almost believe you *were* ignorant in the idleness you showed in my absence, if you are this much a fool even about your own son. Now the true test begins. Draco, I will release you from the curse, and I will give you the chance to prove the Malfoy name has worth, since your father is too weak to be trusted. Do you understand?"

"Yes, my lord," Draco said, and with a wave of Voldemort's wand, the haze over Draco's mind cleared, the Imperius curse only a memory.

Draco was himself again, with a smear of Harry's blood on his hands, grave dirt over his best shoes and Theo's purple-not-red shirt and the necklace of the Hungarian Horntail. He was standing over the crumpled body of Harry, who he had brought to his doom. The dragon had touched the stag and made him bleed.

"No," Draco gasped, stumbling back, but Father grasped his shoulders from behind, keeping him in place. "No, no... this, this can't be, I... I didn't... no..."

"Draco Lucius Malfoy," Voldemort said coldly. "It is time. Take out your wand and raise it."

With a trembling hand, Draco obeyed, without any thought what he meant to do with it, only that having his wand out felt like a good idea. He felt the power of the talon wand surge through him at the touch, his one consolation as memory flooded back into him, the guilt that oppressed him enough to make him want to point his wand at his own throat and speak the fatal words he had promised Severus he would never say.

But there were other words he was being told. "Good. Still obedient, then? Very well. Wormtail, get the Potter boy up on his knees. Take out the gag. Let Draco hear his screams."

Wormtail ungagged Harry, and Harry was immediately gasping too much to say anything. Because when Draco had gagged him, he had tightened the ropes too much. He had been the one to do this to Harry, him and no one else. He was the only one who could have done it. He

had been the one to stop the plot, and he had been the one to finish it. And now Voldemort wanted him to-

"Have you ever cast the Cruciatus curse?" Voldemort asked, and Father answered for him.

"Yes, my lord, he has, he knows all kinds of dark magic- he's very powerful already..."

"Show us, then," Voldemort said lazily. Wormtail knotted his gleaming silver hand in Harry's dark hair, and tugged his head backwards, so his breathless face was on display for all of them. Those green eyes were indescribably beautiful in their unending defiance, looking at nothing and no one but Draco, surrounded by decay and filth and death and darkness and nothing but the most brilliant green of oceans under the moonlight. Forsaken by all the world, forsaken even by Draco, it seemed the moon at least was still in love with Harry Potter.

"Cast Cruciatus on him!" Voldemort demanded. Wormtail stepped out of the way at that, Father seizing Draco's shoulder to hiss *Do it* in his ear. Draco shook Father off without looking at him, staring not at Voldemort but Harry. "Do it now!" Voldemort insisted, high shrill evil noise never more perverted with glee. "Show me! Show me who you are!"

"Yes," Draco heard himself say. He imagined every dam on the talon wand coming down in turn, every wall around its power crumbling down until there was nothing but pure fire in that twisted shape, nothing but dragonfire in his veins. He closed his eyes, the graveyard dropping away, the guilt with it, the murmurs and laughter and whispers of fear, his father's terror, Voldemort's voice. There was nothing there when he opened his eyes but Harry kneeling there still trying to breathe, waiting for Draco to make his choice.

And he could. He could choose now.

"Yes. I'll show you who I am. Avada Kedavra!"

He turned towards Voldemort before he cast, and the green light shot out of his wand, a great emerald burst of it, in the most perfect of déjà vu there in the darkness.

Flashing out to murder a snake.

The green light never reached Voldemort. He stepped aside, or dodged, or flicked his wand and moved a face in front of his, Harry too low to the ground to be used- but Wormtail, Wormtail was there right beside him. Draco would never know which one it had been, and Wormtail never saw it coming.

Peter Pettigrew and his shiny new silver hand were thrown into the air. Green light went the brightest, fire-white at its center, as that rodent face had its beady eyes blown out wide in surprise and forever frozen that way. He crumpled to the ground like a rag doll, a marionette with all its strings cut by the green mist that engulfed him and swallowed him whole like the deepest of dragonfire, and then his body lay dead beside Harry Potter.

The Corpse of Peter Pettigrew

Chapter Notes

Playlist

When Wormtail's stifled half-scream had faded, and the thud of his body into the dust left nothing but green mist and fury in the air, Voldemort raised his wand. But Father had already pushed Draco aside to the ground, throwing himself bodily between them.

"Mercy! Mercy, my lord! My son, he was trying to prove his worth! He meant to kill Wormtail! Wormtail is his enemy, he has spoken ill of my son- he deceived him, fought against him last year- Wormtail is a worthless traitor- Draco was aiming at that, I know it, and you see it now, you see how powerful he is- he will prove a great servant for you, vicious and cruel- *mercy*, my lord-"

And Voldemort accepted it. He couldn't have *believed* it. Draco never thought Voldemort would even entertain it, let alone go with it like he did. But maybe Father was more valuable than Voldemort let on, and killing him right then was not in his plans. Or it would be too much trouble, too much of a cloud on his big day when the main event was his resurrection and the death of Harry Potter. Maybe he wanted to take his time with Draco and Father at more leisure.

Or maybe it was what he said then, as he began to laugh shrilly, like they had all behaved exactly as he truly wanted. "Yes, Lucius, good. Very good. Well, then, my sweet vicious little one, if you would not like to do it yourself, by all means, sit back and be my audience. You will enjoy that, Harry Potter, will you not, having your pretty friend here to watch you fail and lose and die?"

Good old Voldy had lost Tom Riddle's looks, but he hadn't gained much more aplomb at menacing. Draco tried to move from under his father's greater weight, mind and body numb from the spell he had just unleashed. "Bind your son and take his wand," Voldemort ordered lazily. Father cast Incarcerous, but when Draco's fumbling hand pushed the talon wand into his own side pocket just before the rope caught it, Father didn't stop him.

Was it fear of the talon wand's brand, of the burn preventing him from taking it, humiliating him yet again in front of Voldemort? Or was it the same loyalty that had somehow led him to throw himself on Draco, in front of Voldemort's wand?

It didn't matter. All that mattered was whether Harry was about to die.

"See, I want him to watch," Voldemort went in a louder voice. "I want there to be no mistake in anybody's mind. Harry Potter escaped me by a lucky chance. And I am now going to prove

my power by killing him, here and now, in front of you all, when there is no Dumbledore to help him, and no mother to die for him. I will give him his chance. He will be allowed to fight, and you will be left in no doubt which of us is the stronger. Just a little longer, Nagini, and then you will *feast.* Now give him back his wand."

Voldemort gave Father the wand, and Father pressed it into Harry's hand, before rushing back to take Draco by the shoulders and keep him there. Harry rose to his feet, and seemed to consider fleeing, before the circle of Death Eaters closed the gaps, taking all a step closer to where the circle was filled by Malfoys, the Dark Lord, the Boy Who Lived, and the corpse of Peter Pettigrew.

"You have been taught how to duel, Harry Potter?" Voldemort said with soft cruelty, as if meant to be a taunt at how insufficient a match Harry posed. But Harry's eyes strayed backwards, to Draco's bound frame, if only for a moment, and flashed in what was almost a smile.

Then he had turned back, unsteady on his feet, and called, "Yes. I've been taught how to duel."

"Good. We bow to each other, Harry," said Voldemort, and gave a mock one. "Come, the niceties must be observed... Dumbledore would like you to show manners... bow to death, Harry..."

Everyone was laughing, as though Voldemort had said some bon mot at the cutting edge of wit. Draco didn't see the humor, even objectively. But he supposed that when you were that much of a homicidal madman, the quality of your jokes stopped mattering. People just laughed for you.

"I said, bow," Voldemort ordered, and made Harry bow with his wand. Draco's teeth gritted together. *Kill him,* Draco willed, *Kill him, Harry, kill the bastard, kill him for me, kill him for your mother and father...*

But the last thing he should do was speak and distract Harry. So he just willed for everything he had taught Harry, everything all his friends and teachers and Dumbledore and his godfather had ever said to him, to be enough... knowing, even as he prayed, that it wouldn't be.

"Very good," Voldemort said, as if his stagecraft proved anything more than his own perversion. "And now you face me, like a man... straight-backed and proud, the way your father died..." How Draco hoped Harry would make Voldemort pay for those words. "And now- we duel."

Voldemort failed to observe proper dueling form at the last, skipping the count to hit Harry with a sucker punch of a Cruciatus curse. Draco remembered, with a bitter smile, like his life was already flashing before his eyes, how Ron had declared Draco a cheat in Draco and Harry's duel in first year, for using dark magic. So maybe Voldemort was doubly unfair... really, Harry ought to be entitled to a rematch, whatever the results...

"Do something," Draco whispered to his father as Harry screamed. "Stop this, or untie my wrists- let me use my wand, let me fight with him-"

"Let you die with him, you mean?" Father whispered frantically in Draco's ear. "Do you still think I have chosen the wrong side?"

Draco took a deep breath. "Yes," he said, with every fiber in his body full of conviction, just as much conviction as he held that Harry Potter was about to die. "Yes, I do."

Voldemort dropped the Cruciatus curse, and began to play about with Harry, looking like he was getting his rocks off in a way he hadn't since Aunt Bella went to Azkaban. "A little break. A little pause... that hurt, didn't it, Harry? You don't want me to-"

"LACARNUM INFLAMARI!" Harry shouted, and a ball of fire flew from his wand. Voldemort jerked back, laugh freezing as true shock hit the red eyes. It was the first sign of any thought he might have miscalculated, even after having seen the son of a Death Eater shoot the Killing curse at him. It was as he raised his shield to hold back the fire Harry Potter threw at him that Voldemort seemed to realize that maybe, he had not known everything there was to know.

Harry pressed his advantage. Draco laughed breathlessly as he kept trying to shake off his father, because seeing that had been worth dying for. He loved Harry, he loved him so much, more than he had ever thought it would be possible for anyone to love anything. He just wished he had told him that before everything was already over.

"Lacarnum inflamari!" Harry shouted again. Less a fireball than a gust of flame that shot out at Voldemort then, bathing his entire shield until it had become an orb of fire. Except then the fire became a snake, and was roaring forward at Harry, who had to get up a shield-

Except he didn't. Harry hissed, just *hissed*, and the snake turned in the air and dove at Voldemort instead. Harry ran while Voldemort was driven back, shield flashing with the fire striking and stabbing at it. Draco's heart went wild with misgiving and hope as he saw Harry duck behind Tom Riddle's headstone. Voldemort shot the Cruciatus curse in fury at Harry, and all it hit was his father's bloodstained grave.

"We are not playing hide-and-seek, Harry!" Voldemort yelled, rolling up his sleeves over ghastly marrow-like wrists too spindly with sinew to fit a Dark Mark. This monster seemed none too fond of fire, or of prey that put up more of a fight than he had been counting on. Maybe if he'd known Harry had received any real training at all at dueling, he wouldn't have set up this play for his Death Eaters' benefit. In Voldemort's mind, he was clearly meant not just to triumph, but to do it with laughable ease, to make obvious once and for all that disobedience was death. So this was already a failure. He had flinched, he had ducked, he had been shocked, for a moment not been in control, and with that, he had already lost...

"Come out, Harry..." Voldemort said, putting fake playfulness back in his voice. "Come out and play... you can't hide forever... I'm coming to get you... just like your Mudblood mother..."

"Expelliarmus!" Harry screamed, leaping from behind the rubble of the grave, and the Gryffindor-red light shot out from his wand, but Slytherin green was there to meet him.

"Avada Kedavra!" Voldemort cried, and Draco thought Harry dead before the second word had been spoken. But as the two jets of light flew through the air and met, the green one did not force back the red to hit its target and end the best thing in the world. They touched each other and changed, like blue line and red line coming together, except when this red was laid over with cold, it turned gold. It was as bright a gold light as had haloed Harry when he won the cup, as bright a gold as the Quidditch Cup trophy, as every trophy in the world put together, as the gardens full of golden roses at Malfoy Manor. Pure, true gold.

Their wands were vibrating. Draco had known nothing of this, had no idea what was happening, only knew it was something other than Harry's death. He jerked his bound body from his father's and threw him off, crawling only to slip and fall face-first into the corpse of Wormtail...

Draco's head bashed into the head of the man he'd murdered. The golden light went hazier as it grew behind him, a dome as Harry and Voldemort were raised in the air, and lines of the light formed a globe. The Death Eaters were all chaos, and Father could not move to get Draco back when he was surrounded by stampeding men rushing to and fro, trying to establish a new perimeter to keep in the Boy Who Lived. From the sound of it, with Father on the ground where he had been holding Draco, someone stepped on him and trampled him...

Knife, Draco thought, and began to search with his bound hands crazily over Wormtail's corpse for the bloody knife, unsure even as he did whether he had ever given the knife back to Wormtail...

He could hear Voldemort shouting for the Death Eaters not to do anything, that Harry was his to kill. This definitely wasn't going to plan for the sad snake bastard, was it? Draco knew that feeling. Far easier to act arrogant and invulnerable when everything was just following your script. Draco had a new script: *Knife.* He had to find the knife, that was all he knew...

But he couldn't hear a thing, as there was the sound of a phoenix singing like in the Chamber of Secrets. At the time, Draco thought he was hallucinating, and took it as an omen- neither good or bad, just as an omen, something surely only he was hearing. He searched the last of Wormtail's pockets and found the knife. In the distance, the Death Eaters had formed their own globe around the circle of the golden light, where it seemed the phoenix was singing. Maybe Draco wasn't just imagining it. Maybe Fawkes had come again to save Harry.

But it was not Fawkes who sprang out of the golden light as soon as it dissolved. The angel running forth like a burning brand in the night was just Harry Potter, bloodied and dirtied, with his glasses filthy and half-broken but still there in place before his green eyes, which were fixed unerringly forward... Voldemort was not following, gray shapes crowding around him. It was the Death Eaters to pursue Harry, but in absolute confusion. There was no onslaught of green light all around like Draco feared, because after all, their lord had forbidden them to kill Harry. He was Voldemort's to kill.

Or not. Harry was running away from him, towards the broken grave and past it. He was running right for Draco, where he was lying on top of Wormtail, his hands still bound.

Voldemort was yelling to stun him, and Harry dodged the red light, hiding behind an angel. Draco saw Harry's silhouette lit up in red in front of the dark angel wings, before he called out, "Lacarnum inflamari!" There was a wall of flames, a real firestorm surging between everyone but them and the corpse.

"Relashio!" Harry called, just as Draco had taught him, and Draco's hands were free. Voldemort was screaming in the distance about how he was going to kill Harry, but he was only one of many dark shadows behind a fire that seemed to burn as high as the sky...

Draco dragged Wormtail's corpse with him, the grave and Harry all he could see. Then he and Harry locked eyes, and then Harry called "Accio!" The cup soared through the air in a perfect arc, every second Hermione had spent drilling the summoning spell into that beautiful head not going to waste, as the handle hit Harry's bloody palm with the cut. Harry's wand went into his pocket, as he grabbed Draco's wrist with the other hand. Draco kept his grip on the corpse as the Portkey began to work, whirling them out of the darkness and shadow, out of the high shrieking of Voldemort as his failure was complete, the Boy Who Lived living yet again, with his betrayer and his betrayer's victim on the way back home...

They hit the cold hard ground, moonlight above them and a corpse beneath, as the cup slid clattering onto the black stone. His mind was spinning, too dizzy to comprehend the trip they had just taken, the things that he had done, the fact that once again, Harry Potter had saved him. He could smell the night, and Harry beside him, though dirt and blood were the strongest smells, and the sweeter reek of death, as if putrefaction was already beginning. Draco wanted to burst into tears and kiss the Hogwarts stone- kiss *Harry*, *his* Harry, *alive*- but first he had to climb off the corpse-

"Harry," Draco breathed, and with effort rolled off Wormtail's body, blinking in the dim light at the sight of Harry crouched before him in shadow. The cup was still there, and Harry was breathing hard, not from the Portkey but grabbing at his scar. They had returned to the Astronomy Tower, and as improbable as it seemed, after what they had faced, this had become a place that meant safe harbors.

"Harry, are you alright?" Harry nodded, and Draco tried to stay awake, tried not to let yet another blow to his exhausted head take away his consciousness. The world was reeling, everything around him still careening like the Portkey had started up again, just for him. "Harry, I was under the Imperius curse... he enchanted me, he made me... made me betray you... but when the Dark Lord released me, did you see... did you see I tried... I tried to kill him, Harry- I'm sorry, I couldn't, but I tried..."

Harry nodded again, pressed his trembling lips to Draco's forehead, whispering something Draco couldn't hear. So Draco gave way and let the world drop away into darkness.

The first thing Draco saw when he awoke was a silver doe alone in a dark woods.

"Severus?" he whispered. When he tried to sit up, his head filled with fuzziness. He was in a large comfortable bed, the covers around him black, as were the ceilings and floors and walls save for the tapestry. "Severus?" he called again, with no answer.

Draco gave himself a few moments snuggling into the covers, burying his face into the generous pile of furry black pillows, before peeling his face off the top one again, and making the incredible effort of forcing his eyes open. Several such aborted attempts let him know he was indeed in Severus's rooms, in the sparse, barren room where his fireplace and armchairs had once been, migrated to another after he and then Draco had destroyed the wall behind the tapestry, by distrust. Draco lay in a bed that had not been there before, with a warmth accumulated from his body under the covers that he was reluctant to let dissipate, even though his mind had the dim awareness that once it got itself thinking past the most essential questions, an abyss awaited him...

If the mirror sent me back to change things, I haven't changed a damn thing. The Dark Lord has risen all the same. The only difference now is that the one most to blame is me.

Draco sat up with a start in the bed, opening his eyes to find the silver doe's face had taken on an expressiveness it had never seemed to wear before. There was a judgment there, as if asking, *Why did I protect you? Why did I not just let those Dementors swallow you whole, if this is all you are?*

But he had killed Pettigrew. A year late, but he had done it, and that was something. And they had gotten the body back. What that meant remained to be seen. Most of all what it meant for-

"Sirius!" Draco cried out, clambering out of bed at the sight of the famous fugitive entering the room. "Uncle Sirius!" If Draco hadn't seen him as a young man in Severus's Pensieve, it would have taken him far longer to recognize him. Not just from the stress and exhaustion, but because he looked a different person. His dark hair was still long, but groomed in sleek waves around his face, his beard trimmed, his face no longer gaunt. His plain, flowing black robes were well-fitted and pristine, halfway between the Prisoner of Azkaban and the arrogant teenager he had once been.

He looked like a grown, healthy man, strong and handsome and powerful, like the wizard he had been meant to be before Wormtail ruined his life. Sirius had sounded in good spirits in his letters, but Draco could never have imagined he could have recovered physically this much. The sight made Draco smile shakily, even before Sirius had rushed forward and seized Draco in his arms.

"Draco, you're awake!" Sirius exclaimed. "How are you feeling? It's been three days."

"I don't know- what? Three days?" Draco blinked rapidly, staring at Sirius willing him to make anything make sense to him. "Where's Harry? Is he alright? Did you- did you get the body?"

"Harry isn't hurt. He was in the hospital wing, after the ordeal he went through, but he's been let out. He said you killed Peter Pettigrew," Sirius said quietly. "And when Dumbledore performed Priori Incantato on your wand, the last spell was the Killing curse. Draco, it's true, isn't it?"

"Am I going to Azkaban?" Draco asked in a trembling voice, and Sirius practically picked him up, to sit him on the bed before embracing him again.

"That hellhole," Sirius said firmly, "Is no place for you. You will never go there, Draco- if I have it my way, you'll never even *see* it-"

"Did Harry tell you what the Dark Lord said about Azkaban?" Draco asked anxiously. "About how he said the Lestranges will get out, and the Dementors will join his side-"

"Harry told us everything," Sirius said, sitting beside him and taking his shoulders, and Draco melted against him, desperate for the comfort of that confidence. "He told us you were under Imperius, that he heard Voldemort say it himself, and that when he took it off you and told you to torture Harry, you cast the Killing curse against Voldemort instead." Draco nodded warily. "You know, I could try and say I was surprised, but I wasn't. That's my nephew, I said. And Remus wasn't surprised either."

He sounded fond, but there was nothing for Draco to be proud of. "I should have been able to resist the Imperius curse. Harry can fight it, he did the first time Moody cast it on him in class- but I never could when Moody tried it. That's how he knew it would work-"

"His real name was never Moody. It was Bartemius Crouch. The junior one. Someone else had taken his place in Azkaban."

"Oh, no, Uncle Sirius," Draco said weakly, trying to comfort Sirius by acting his old self. He forgot to feign surprise, but Sirius just seemed to take that as shock. "Are you no longer the most famous escaped Prisoner of Azkaban? Are you about to lose your title?"

"Hardly," Sirius said, "Given that he's dead. Well, Kissed, to be precise. He got the Dementor's Kiss. Fudge brought one into the castle, and it did away with him. The official story is that it was an accident, but I think Fudge wants this all hushed up. He doesn't believe Voldemort's returned. He thinks Harry's a liar, that he or Dumbledore killed Pettigrew themselves-"

"I can talk to him," Draco said intently, "I can tell him it was me, that I saw it too-"

Sirius shook his head. "Your name's been left out of it, Draco. The decision was made long before you woke up. I was so afraid for you when I heard what had happened- afraid you would have to suffer false accusations like I did- but Snape gave Crouch Veritaserum, and Dumbledore questioned him before he was killed. Crouch admitted to cursing you to make you help them, and his story matched Harry's. So on the official record, Draco, it was only Harry in that graveyard. The Portkey only took him, and you were never involved at all."

"But if the Minister of Magic is calling Harry a liar-"

"Draco, it's not that he doesn't have enough evidence, it's that he wants Harry to be a liar," Sirius groaned, shaking his head at the stupidity. "He's always feared Dumbledore is after his job, and he sees this as a pretext. A show. A man like that, a *coward* like that- he can't face the prospect of Voldemort being back. If your name was involved too, it would just make this twice as hard. I'm sorry, Draco, but you're a Malfoy *and* a Black. No one would believe you. And even a Death Eater, even in self-defense- if the world knew you used one of the Unforgivables and *killed*, Draco, it would ruin your life before it ever began..."

"So it's all been decided for me, while I just *slept*?" No one had believed Harry in the blue loop either. Draco had thought that very funny, the first time around. "Why is everyone *protecting* me?"

"Because you're a hero, Draco," Sirius hugged him again around the shoulders, and Draco gave him the most unfathomably baffled look. "Dumbledore always talks, you know, about when you have the chance to choose between what is right, and what is easy. And you had that choice. You had that choice as hard as anyone could ever have it. And what you chose... Draco, you *tried to kill Voldemort*. It's a wonder you aren't in Gryffindor, my boy..."

"The Sorting Hat said I didn't have the courage," Draco said honestly, and Sirius scoffed.

"Maybe you've changed since then," Sirius said, grinning. "You know, with the influence of your favorite uncle..."

"Or maybe," a deeper, drier voice intoned, "The hat knew him to be too *intelligent* for your house." When Draco looked up, Severus was behind Sirius, leaning there in the doorframe. He could have been standing there any length of time, but Sirius's last remarks seemed to have driven him to intervene. "Draco, if this wandering stray mutt is bothering you, let me know and I will send him back to his lupine owner ex... post... *facto*."

"Severus!" Draco gasped, and Sirius stepped back, not seeming to begrudge Draco the thrill and relief of this reunion. "Severus, you're alive! *I'm* alive! I never thought I would see you again... Severus, I'm sorry, I'm so sorry, this is all my fault, if I could have fought the Imperius curse... but I was too weak... or if I had just killed Pettigrew *last* year..."

"Don't do that," Sirius said heavily. "Don't do the what if's. Don't play that game. It will drive you crazy, Draco, believe me. You can't try and reckon out how things would have been if you had just done something else, or you'll be no use to anyone, looking back instead of looking forward. We have to look forward now. Because even if the world doesn't want to believe it, Voldemort has returned, and *we* are the people who are going to have to fight him." He glanced at Severus when he said it.

"Have you- have you gone back as a spy?" Draco gasped, leaping up to start towards Severus accusingly. "Severus, say you haven't- Dumbledore can't make you, it's too dangerous- the Dark Lord is unhinged, he's just going to kill you-"

"Draco," Sirius said gently, "That's your godfather's choice to make." The two men exchanged glances, as if more had passed between them than this conversation while waiting for Draco to wake up. Almost like some understanding had come between them, or more likely between Severus and Remus, with the old Defense professor the one to negotiate the detente. Or maybe the whole life debt thing was helping. "We're all going to have a part to play in the war to come."

"I don't want there to be a war," Draco said in a small voice, staring between the two tall brave men on either side of him and wishing he could just bury his face in the pillows again and go to bed. He wanted to wake up in a world where his and Luna's plan had worked, where he had no more worries than whether he could negotiate a visit with Hermione out of Father this summer.

"I'm sorry, Draco," Sirius said, and headed towards the door, but stopped at the threshold once he and Severus had switched places. "And thank you. Thank you so much for everything."

"What did he mean?" Draco asked Severus, once Sirius had become a dog and padded out. So that explained his presence at Hogwarts. "For not torturing Harry?"

Severus laughed mirthlessly. "And that has been a dilemma for you, Draco? What a worthless job I have done as a godfather at protecting you." When Draco opened his mouth to protest, an arched eyebrow and head tilt from Severus silenced him. "If you will kindly bestir yourself to think even slightly past the immediate moment, you will realize that the arrival of the intact body of Peter Pettigrew- freshly and not decades since killed, with one wrist wearing the Dark Mark, and the other a silver hand manufactured by the darkest of magic- that changes the complexion of affairs for a man who was, after all, convicted in part for the murder of that man thirteen years ago..."

"The prophecy!" Draco yelled, so loud that Severus jumped away, covering his ears and giving him a wounded look. "No, it's just- last year- I would save Sirius- the dragon would strike, the rat would be swallowed in flame, and the Grim would rise- she saw that I was going to kill Pettigrew, didn't she? I thought- I don't know-"

"Draco," Severus said wearily, "Whatever inane Divination-related blathering you have to share, I must ask you to engage in it on your own time. Lest I, in my capacity as both Head of House and godfather, feel compelled to ask how you managed to become the first student in Hogwarts history to be banned for life, not just from Divination, but the Divination Tower..."

"Okay, okay, I'm sorry!" Draco said, throwing up his hands. "Just- I promised Uncle Sirius that I would clear his name. Me and Hermione and Luna, we all promised it, him and each other. And now... do you think we could?"

"In all probability," Severus said, looking to be hiding a continued distaste at the prospect. "There will have to be a trial. There was never one in the first place, that will be in his favor. And you may have to testify, as may many of your friends, even myself. Which I will, if you ask it of me, Draco. It can be explained to the Dark Lord as necessary to maintain my cover with Dumbledore. And having Harry Potter speaking for Black should help. Whether Potter is enough to convince the world the Dark Lord is back, *that* may be harder..."

Draco shuddered at the mention of Severus' new mission as a spy, but tried to maintain some continued facade of strength for Severus. "And Harry... he's okay? He's really okay? Sirius said, but... everyone, even Dumbledore- they want him to lie for me about the graveyard? To take all the blame for this? As if he didn't have enough reason to hate me already... can I see him?"

"Draco," Severus said, closing his eyes, "If you must fawn over the boy in my presence-"

"You knew," Draco said suddenly, intuition striking. "You knew Harry liked me. When I asked you about the Yule Ball, you knew, you knew he *did* feel that way about me, but you lied, you said he didn't, so I wouldn't... no, it's okay. It's okay, Severus. It's good- it's good you did- because I might have tried- might have tried to be with him... and that can't happen,

can it? It would ruin everything for him- I would taint him- with my name, my blood- with *me*-"

"Draco," Severus said with a pained grimace, "Consult with me no longer on *this*. The decision is yours. It has always been yours. Do I think the boy deserves to so much as kiss your *feet*? No, and the events of the past week have if anything *strengthened* that perspective, with the person you showed yourself to be in that graveyard- but what if *you* need is truly Harry Potter, then I..." He looked as if he had never said bitterer words. "Then I will not stand in your way."

But Draco's attention had been caught by what Severus had said about strength. "I broke my promise to you too, Severus," Draco said, blanching. "Avada Kedavra..."

"In those circumstances, I am glad you broke it. And really," he went on silkily. "It was a Gryffindor who got it, so does that even count?"

Somehow, even with everything, Severus managed to make him laugh. But reality descended again all too quickly. "I don't know how I'm going to face him, Severus," Draco said, covering his face. "Harry *or* Hermione- Ron, Luna, the Weasleys- Remus, Dumbledore, McGonagall, anyone who knows- I can't face them, Severus, not as a traitor and a murderer-"

"Draco," Severus said in a tone that would brook no interruption. "I will only say this once, and I would prefer not to say it at all. So do not make me say it again. I have never been prouder to call myself your godfather."

Draco didn't leave Severus's rooms until the next day. Severus had told him he wasn't obliged to go to meals for the rest of term, and that he could stay in Severus's rooms until then, both of which suited Draco all too well. He wondered what his fellow Slytherins would have heard of the events of the night of the Third Task, what they might have heard or been told by their parents, and was not relishing the idea of facing any of his yearmates again, let alone his actual friends. Sirius and Severus had told him not to be ashamed, had called him a hero, even, but willing or not, he had...

There was one person he felt almost certain would not blame him, though, even if he had imperiled his beloved Harry Potter. Dobby knew a thing or two about doing things you didn't want to, under the coercion of forced duty. So Draco's first stop that Tuesday morning was sneaking into the kitchens for breakfast. The elves must have softened towards Dobby since the last reports, or at least some of them, because they called over to Dobby, and took over his kitchen duties at once so he could go greet Draco. And he seemed happy to return Draco's embrace.

Draco couldn't believe he had ever used to think house elves ugly or misshapen. He had seen real ugliness, in the process of Voldemort being reborn. Dobby was adorable, marble eyes turning to saucers in guileless wonder at the sight of his first friend returned to him, and all the happier when Draco showed him he was wearing the Slytherin socks he had given him for Christmas. "Dobby has been hoping," Dobby said, teary-eyed, "That you are warm in the

dungeons. Dobby was told to let you rest, but Dobby and all of Draco Malfoy's friends have been worried about Draco Malfoy..."

"And Harry Potter?" Draco couldn't help but ask. "Have you seen him? How is he?"

Dobby nodded, and then looked around shiftily. "Dobby thinks he is fine. Dobby has to finish with something in the kitchen quickly. Dobby will just be a second."

And Draco bought it, despite Dobby being a singularly terrible liar. But Draco was out of it enough to sit there, contentedly stuffing his face on a pile of pillows beside Dobby, talking of anything except the night of the Third Task, until a voice shrieked, "*Draco*!"

Draco's eyes shot wide. "Hermione?" he breathed, and saw her racing towards him.

Dobby looked surprised. "Dobby sent a note to say Draco Malfoy is here. Dobby is sorry..."

"It's alright!" Draco laughed. "Merlin, of course it's alright- Hermione!" Draco leaped up, seized her around the waist in a fierce hug, and buried his face in her bushy hair, the texture indescribably full of safety. She let all his weight sag on her, and her soft hands stroked through his hair, and he could feel then, at least one thing in his life hadn't changed.

"Oh, Frankenstein, I thought you'd look so much worse," was the first thing she said, and he made a face at her. "No, Draco, I'm saying you *don't* look terrible! I just know- with the magical exhaustion, they said you were practically in a coma-" She stopped once she saw him looking around at all the elves. "I've been so worried about you, you can't imagine. We weren't allowed to come see you. But I've heard about everything... everything that happened..."

Draco drew his wand and cast Muffliato, so he could say what he had to. "I'm sorry. I shouldn't have let him get the jump on me. And I should have been able to fight the curse off- I tried, I did try, I kept thinking I should but it wasn't- it wasn't- and then I- I should have been stronger-"

Hermione quickly made him stop the self-laceration. But she wanted to hear everything that had happened in the graveyard.

Draco didn't want to tell her, but he did. He told her everything he could remember of that night, save the kissing, from the moment she had left him. And she kept blaming herself over and over, saying, *If I hadn't left you alone, if I had just brought you with me...*

"Sirius said to me," Draco sighed, "That what ifs are no good. That we have to just face the future. Because the future..."

"The future is terrifying now," Hermione whispered, and at least Draco hadn't had to be the one to say it.

They were in the kitchens together practically until lunch, but it wasn't until they were leaving that Draco found out the note Dobby sent hadn't been for Hermione. "Is Harry Potter

alright?" Dobby rushed over to ask before she left, and it came out then, that Dobby had magicked a special plate with a note onto the Gryffindor table, but for Harry.

"But you... but you came instead," Draco said, trying not to assume the worst, but Hermione's face went so strained and evasive, it felt like a sure rejection. "Does he... does he hate me for it, Striker? Does he blame me? Does *he* think I should have done better?"

"He just..." Hermione took a deep breath. "He's just been really shaken up, Draco, after everything that happened. He blames *himself.* You don't know how depressed he's been since it ended... not just after Fudge didn't believe him that You-Know-Who is back, but before... Draco, he thinks it's all his fault... and you know, the *way* that he was taken... he says *you* won't *really* want to see him now."

Draco froze in the door of the kitchens, then quickly stepped beyond them, pulling her onto the dark stone steps. "Hermione, what has he said? What has he told you about what happened?"

"Just that... oh, it's all so complicated," she sighed. "Apparently Crouch said that the cup was meant to be a Portkey, when the winner touched it in the Third Task, but it didn't work then for some reason, so he put the Imperius curse on you, and had you take it to Harry and reactivate it, and that's how Harry got taken to the graveyard with you... that's all Harry's told us, that he brought the cup to show you." She gave Draco a significant look as she added, "I don't think he's told anyone else anything more either."

She clearly suspected there was more to it. Maybe even what it was, from the conversation they'd had right after the Third Task, and how ashamed Harry must be acting. But she hadn't told anyone, and she wasn't going to make him say it. He didn't deserve a friend like her.

"Where is he?" Draco asked, voice cracking pathetically. "Do you think he would want to talk to me? I should say I'm sorry... tell him I want to see him, please, just to apologize, anytime..."

"I'll tell him," Hermione said, with heavy doubt in her eyes.

Draco went back to Severus's chambers and sat there in his makeshift bed, gloomily reading and rereading *Moste Dark Blood Rituals of the Demon Goddess Hecate* over and over, mainly the pages on Naufragiam. It was good that his only visitor that afternoon was Luna, to whom that book was an old friend. "Are you trying to figure out why it didn't work?"

"COUSIN!" Draco exclaimed, and tried to get out of bed, but she clambered over and sat down before he could, blocking the sheets so he couldn't get up. "Luna, I missed you... Luna..."

"Is it okay that I came?" Luna said with a sniffle, eyes already wet with tears, even once he pulled her down to lie beside him. "I didn't know if you'd want to see me... I know it's all my fault..." Her eyes strayed towards the book guiltily. "I must have screwed up the potion or the ritual somehow... maybe it was the prayer I did... if I hadn't messed up the Naufragiam, none

of this would have happened, I'm so sorry... I didn't tell anyone, I promise, I wanted to but I didn't- but if you want me to I will, I'll tell everyone you tried to stop this, and it's my fault it happened anyway-"

"Luna, don't cry!" Draco exclaimed in alarm. "Luna, the Naufragiam *worked*. The Portkey only worked for me, and I pulled him with me. I don't even know if that would have worked if it hadn't been me pulling, since I made the potion. Luna, you did everything perfect, I promise." She nodded but didn't look convinced.

So it seemed that in the wake of tragedy, all of them were blaming themselves instead of each other. Draco had never experienced anything like this before, but then again, he had spent much of the war around exclusively Slytherins.

He didn't think Ron would find a way to make it his fault, but somehow, he managed. He showed up soon after Luna, having also gotten word that Draco was up and about, with a wizard's chess set and that hilariously derpy Ronald Weasley guilt face, stammering apologies about how *If I hadn't gotten you banned from the Gryffindor common room last year, freaking out about you in Harry's bed, you'd have just come to the party with us, and the imposter couldn't have gotten you...*

Draco was glad to be the convalescing one, and give Ron a good solid whack over the head with a pillow for his stupidity, with Ron unable to retaliate. And he didn't seem to want to. When they finished chess, he and Luna sat on Draco's bed together playing a three-way game of the Weasley twins' personal variation of Exploding Snap that was, well, heavy on the explosions. It decimated the nice bedcovers Severus had gotten for Draco, but Luna magicked them back perfect after.

When Luna was done, Ron looked down embarrassed, and stammered out something about being glad Draco had come back alive. If only because Theo had apparently been bothering Ron endlessly for news of Draco's safety. Luna enthusiastically endorsed the sentiment, and then poked her head back in when Ron steeled up the courage to ask, "Is it true what Harry says, that you tried to kill You-Know-Who?"

"Yeah," Draco said with a sigh. "Is it true that Harry doesn't want to talk to me now?"

They exchanged telling glances. "Er, just give him a day or two, mate," Ron said with forced chipperness. "He'll come around."

But he didn't. Ron, Luna, and Hermione all came visiting every day, and went on walks with him to the kitchen and the Great Lake, while he recovered his strength and his will to be seen by other people. But Harry was nowhere to be found, nor did he answer an owl asking to talk, or any messages passed to him through their friends or Dobby. If Draco had been braver, he would have hunted Harry down. He still had the Marauder's Map. But he just watched the Harry Potter dot on it obsessively, like a great Horklump. He didn't even have the nerve to go to meals in the Great Hall, which he knew Harry was attending. There would be people there.

The Harry dot spent most of its time in Gryffindor Tower, the Great Hall, or outside, often at Hagrid's Hut. Ron came by on the first with stories of Hagrid going on a secret trip for Dumbledore. Draco sent a note asking for information about that from Harry. He got no response, which he'd been expecting at this point, along with uncomfortable answers from their friends that Harry was "going through something" and "needed some time."

Well, Draco had promised them all he would make an appearance at the end-of-year feast, with the full intention to take himself and Luna to sit with the Gryffindor trio and damn what anyone thought of that. Harry would see him then, however little he wanted to.

Harry's avoidance, and the obsessive map-watching that inspired, at least provided a distraction from the largest question that should have been occupying him: what in the world he was going to say to Father at King's Cross. He didn't know if he would be welcome at home, or even if he wanted to be. He might be the subject of a murder attempt the second he stepped into the Manor. He thought twice about writing Mother, and lost the nerve without much struggle. He couldn't even bring himself to ask Severus to stay with him over the break, because then he could pretend to himself that Severus when eventually asked would say yes.

Finally, the subject forced itself on him on the afternoon of the leaving feast, when the door opened for Hermione's visit. "Here, Striker, here's the note for Harry, enchant it and send it off to him, will you?" he said absently, pressing it into waiting hands without looking up.

"Dear Chosen One," a voice that was definitely not Hermione's read. "Ignore my continued attempts at communication at your peril. I will reacquaint you with two relevant facts at this juncture. One, I am currently in possession of both your invisibility cloak and the Marauder's Map. Two, I am currently staying in Severus's rooms, which are in possession of a recently renovated fireplace. With expectation, Draco Malfoy-"

"Professor Lupin, no- don't- give me that," Draco protested in vain, as he leaped out of bed and Remus held it easily out of his range. He handed it back after he was done, looking thankfully nothing but amused. Draco sagged down in embarrassment. "I'm sorry, Professor, I thought you were Hermione..."

"I ran into her on the way and told her I needed to speak to you first." Remus and Sirius had both been in residence at Hogwarts since the events of the Third Task, Sirius largely in Animagus form. "And call me Remus, please. We haven't had a chance to talk in some time, have we, just you and I? Not since I was leaving my position at Hogwarts. Do you remember what you said to me then?"

Draco thought of the most obvious thing. "That Uncle Sirius loved you, and you should..."

Remus smiled just at the memory, his purely *good* face a pleasure just to have near, something like Luna's in the calm it radiated to those around him. "Yes, Draco. You and I started out badly, but with all that, you have done a great deal for me, do you know that? And I don't just mean the Wolfsbane, and that is no small thing. Thank you for that, Draco. I'm glad I can say that to your face now. Thank you more than you know." Remus caught his gaze earnestly. "You helped clear Sirius's name, first with me, and now, hopefully, soon with the rest of the world."

Draco's face lit up. "Will there be a trial, do you think?"

"I do," said Remus, "And surely, you have seen the Prophet recently." Severus had forbade Draco from looking at it yet, but he nodded. "With the news of Pettigrew's *recent* demise, with one arm of silver and the other with a Dark Mark... in the court of public opinion, he is well on his way to being cleared already. And we are looking to the future. Have you ever heard of the Order of the Phoenix?" Draco nodded, remembering the picture Crouch shoved in his face. "In light of recent events, the Order is being reassembled. And it needs a headquarters to meet and plan-"

Draco frowned, remembering tales from the blue loop. "You don't mean Grimmauld-"

"I do," said Remus, smiling wider.

"There was a duel there," Draco said, struggling to remember. "With Aurors..."

"And one of those Aurors," Remus said, nodding, "Was your cousin Nymphadora, though she prefers to be called Tonks. A member of the Order. She has taken pains to ensure all knowledge and mention of that sighting have remained off the books."

Draco wrinkled his nose. "Do you know what it looks like inside?"

"It *is* a ghastly old place, but once it's our new home, we'll do our best with it, to be sure."

"I'll keep making you the Wolfsbane," Draco promised bravely, though of course he had no idea where he would supposedly be doing that, if alive to do it at all. "So that should help..."

"Dumbledore has cast the Fidelius charm on Grimmauld," Remus informed him, "So even before Sirius's name is hopefully cleared, it should be a safe place, both for Sirius and for the Order of the Phoenix to remain out of sight. When we leave Hogwarts, we plan to move there right away."

"Wow, Remus," Draco said, waggling his eyebrows. "Moving in together. Big step, you sly old wolf..."

Remus laughed aloud, covering his mouth. "Steady there, young man. Just because you are fifteen now does not mean you are still not too young for that kind of talk..."

"I'm not that young anymore, Remus. I did kill someone."

"Oh, Draco," Remus sighed, big brown eyes radiating concern, not pity but empathy. "How have you been dealing with that?"

Draco's brow creased. "I don't know. Pretty well? I keep waiting for the guilt to kick in, and it just hasn't. I'm guiltier I didn't do it *sooner*. Maybe I'm a sociopath. I don't know. I shouldn't just be alright with it, that I killed a person, but- I don't feel *anything* about it."

"That might change," Remus said evenly, "Or it might not. But either way, Draco, that's alright. Your uncle and I... we know more than anyone who Peter was, and what his death

means. And no matter what, I hope you know that you can speak to me about it whenever you like, and that I would be the last person to judge you."

Draco's mind struggled to process that past gratefulness. "What, do you have another two-way mirror for me?"

"That's what I came to speak to you about," Remus said gently. "Draco, you do know that you can't go home, don't you?"

Draco froze where he stood, eyes shooting to Remus's, stricken. Remus just gave him that lovely, sweet, gracefully hopeless smile that was his and his alone. "My father..."

"Draco," Remus said, repeating his name slowly in the same soft, reassuring tone. "You can't go home to Malfoy Manor. Not with who your father is. Not with what you did to a Death Eater. Not with what you tried to do to Voldemort. It wouldn't be safe. We're absolutely in agreement on this, Dumbledore and your godfather included." Draco's hands had gone to his mouth, stricken, but they dropped when Remus added, "But that doesn't mean you have nowhere to go."

"Where?" Draco asked, and Remus's brown eyes sparkled.

"I had thought you might have guessed already," Remus said mildly. "I *have* been asking you, in my roundabout way. Aside from your parents, Sirius is not just the head of House Black, but your closest blood relative. He thinks of himself as your uncle. And it would be his great pleasure, and mine, to be able to give you a home different than the one you grew up in. A home where you can decide who you want to be."

"You... you're asking me to come live with you this summer at Grimmauld?" Draco breathed, unable to believe he was understanding correctly.

Remus's smile turned a bit sadder. "You turned fifteen last month, Draco. Sirius was that age when he found he no longer had a place in his family, when he ran away from them and was blasted from the family tree. And he had his own uncle to turn to for money then, even when the rest of his kin turned their backs on him. Money, but not a home. You should have both. Sirius sees so much of himself in you, you know. Just as much as he sees James in Harry. Nothing, Draco, and I mean this, nothing would make him happier than to be able to give you a real home, the way he never had."

"You... Remus, I'd just be in your way..."

"No, you wouldn't. And that is the reason why *I* am asking you and not Sirius. I want it to be clear that it is both of us who want you to come stay with us. Draco, I want to be your teacher again. I want to teach you everything we know about Defense and dueling. And I want to learn from *you*. I want you to be part of our family, and I want you with us as we revive the Order of the Phoenix."

Unforgivable

Chapter Notes

Playlist

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Draco had never seen the Great Hall strewn overhead with banners of deep blue. He had expected black, but he realized with a look over at Hufflepuff that the reason for those black banners had lived. He was waving over at his victorious girlfriend at the Ravenclaw table, a Cho Chang who had never had to witness the Chosen One bring back the body of the boy she loved. The death of Cedric Diggory no longer marked an epoch in the decline and fall of Hogwarts. Diggory sat there amongst his many friends, not the champion but brimming with happiness nonetheless, ready to graduate.

"Luna, you don't want to go sit at Ravenclaw now that you've won the House Cup?" Draco asked, even as she tightened her grip on his hand and led him more quickly towards Gryffindor. They drew stares as they went, after Draco's long absence. Draco had to wonder what conjectures had been made about the disaster that had followed victory for Harry Potter. He was selfishly grateful for his name being left out once he felt those looks, and understood what public knowledge of him having been under Imperius would have done. Everyone was already looking over at him like he had proved himself the Heir of Slytherin after all, and Luna was showing herself just as tainted by touching... a murderer? Was he the one they all correctly suspected to have really brought that dead body back to their romantic old Astronomy Tower?

"Hello, Luna," Ginny said happily, while the twins greeted Draco with welcome casualness, no unusual weight to their reactions as they made room between them and their sister on the Gryffindor bench, five rather than three people worth. Maybe it was because, as Draco knew, all the Weasleys had been told what really happened. But that seemed to occasion, strange as it was, far fewer accusatory stares from the twins than the others around them. If anything, they seemed more interested in teasing Luna about how her house had finally won the House Cup, and she celebrated by going off amongst Gryffindors.

Harry, Ron, and Hermione were so late, Draco's attempts to make conversation grew progressively feebler. "There's no way they're not coming, is there?"

"They'll be here," George said confidently, and Draco found with a chill that he could finally tell them apart, just as it became obvious that he had failed to stop the series of events that would kill the other one of them. "Harry has to have a ceremony for winning the Triwizard Cup."

Maxime was still up there, an affectionate-looking presence at Hagrid's side, but Karkaroff was nowhere in sight. Draco had been told Karkaroff hadn't made an appearance since the night of the Third Task, and that the Order presumed he had gone into hiding after hearing of the Dark Lord's return. Maybe he hadn't been helping with the plot at all. Maybe he'd just been scared, and it really had all just been the fake Moody.

The real Moody was back at his seat, for what Luna told him was the first time. He didn't look to be enjoying it, as his famous paranoia had been dialed up to breaking point by his own suffering that year. Draco had spent so much time complaining to himself about his own short months in Azkaban, when this man had spent many more months trapped in his own case without his prosthetics, with someone else going about with his face, a human DNA dispenser. And yet he had made it to the final feast sooner than Harry Potter.

Harry's trio only made it just in time for Dumbledore's opening speech, which consisted this time of little more than a congratulations on finishing out another year, and a congratulations to Ravenclaw as he formally awarded them the House Cup. When he told them to tuck in, there was hardly any dent in the usual tumult of noise and excitement around them, as the food appeared and everyone began to stuff their faces and talk excitedly about their plans for the summer.

Harry couldn't avoid seeing Draco at their table, but he sandwiched himself between Weasleys, avoiding looking at him after that initial glance. When Draco asked Harry about his summer, for lack of anything else he could say in front of people, Harry just muttered, "Back to the Dursleys," and stabbed his roast chicken harder. At least he was eating, which Draco had been afraid he wouldn't. And he looked like himself, as handsome a figure as ever in his Gryffindor uniform, just quieter, with his eyes looking somewhere further away.

That brief grim answer gave Draco a possible additional motive for Harry's avoidance, apart from the events after the Third Task. He'd promised Harry he would give him a godfather, gift him a real home and family. Now it must feel like Draco had stolen them for himself, as if the brand of thief had been taken off Draco's palm somewhat precipitously. Draco would understand that resentment very well.

Harry's mood cast a pall on the proceedings for all of them, with the chipperness of their chatter growing somewhat forced, even from the twins. They all seemed grateful by the time the feast was winding down and Dumbledore stood up at the front of the high table. There was an unusual solemnity to his manner that had the Great Hall falling silent rapidly.

"The end of another year," Dumbledore began, in a ponderous tone that left no doubt as to his opinion on how that year had gone. "And the end of the Triwizard Tournament. We have a champion from Hogwarts. Mr. Harry Potter, please come forward." Harry showed no sign of obeying, but after every head in the hall turned to him, and some none-too-soft nudges across the table from Hermione, Harry walked up to the high table with an air like it was his death march.

"Congratulations, Mr. Potter," Madame Maxime said, loudly and ceremonially. "Ze Triwizard Champion!" She led her students and then the Great Hall in a round of applause. Harry seemed to take all the hooting and hollering from the Hogwarts students as if they were for someone else. His gaze went even bleaker when Dumbledore went behind the table and

produced a large gilded box, with each corner gleaming in the colors of a Hogwarts house. He waved his wand, and the corners each fell away to the side, and revealed a massive stack of golden Galleons. A thousand, to be precise, Draco knew, and the applause was deafening this time.

Perhaps Karkaroff's absence cast a shade on the formal awarding of the prize, but no one seemed to miss him, even the Durmstrang students over at the Slytherin table. When they exchanged gloomy glances and gave their half-hearted, cursory applause, they were all glancing sadly at Krum. Their sorrow was for him and his defeat.

Once the applause subsided, Dumbledore waved his wand, and the box reassembled itself with a musical clanging. "Congratulations, Harry," he said loudly, and looked like he would have gone on at greater length about his paternal pride without an audience. "Have you anything you would like to say about your victory?"

Harry nodded, and the box disappeared, magicked off to Gryffindor Tower for his ease. He stood at the center up there, where Dumbledore usually stood to speak, and began. "I know this is where I'm meant to thank everyone who helped me get here, and I am thankful. I wouldn't have won without the help of so many people, and they deserve to be named and acknowledged. But the truth is, I can't do that, because I'm not actually a winner. I may be the Triwizard Champion, but that doesn't mean I'm still not a failure."

A murmur ran through the Great Hall, but Harry lifted his chin higher. "A lot has been said about that night. I want to tell you the truth. The night I won the cup, I lost. Because I was kidnapped. I was taken from Hogwarts, and used in a blood ritual in a graveyard. I returned by the same Portkey that had stolen me, with the body of Peter Pettigrew. He was murdered that night. He was murdered by Voldemort."

The murmur became deafening. Just hearing the name spoken would have caused uproar enough, let alone the Boy Who Lived speaking of the man he had supposedly killed in present tense. "Before he was murdered," Harry said, raising his voice to be heard, "Peter Pettigrew conducted the ritual that brought Voldemort back from the dead. And I fought Voldemort that night. He's back, his followers have gone back to him, and he's going to try to do this time what he couldn't do the last- and- and I couldn't stop it. I couldn't stop him. I'm sorry- I'm so sorry-"

Harry's voice cracked, iron composure finally faltering. Dumbledore rose to his feet, taking Harry's shoulder and relieving him of the burden. "Harry Potter speaks the truth," Dumbledore said gravely. "Lord Voldemort has returned."

The cries of fear erupted three times louder, along with sounds of movement and disbelief. Draco wanted to hide his face in his hands, but he couldn't look away from the stricken frame of Harry Potter. There he was, beside the headmaster, stood before the world saying he had failed, when Draco was the one who had failed him.

"There is much that I would like to say to you all tonight," Dumbledore said, "But I must first acknowledge Harry, who fought against Voldemort and his followers against all odds. We owe him all our gratitude, for his refusal to bow down to the most evil man the world has ever known.

"Harry managed to escape. He risked his own life to return the body of Peter Pettigrew to Hogwarts, to clear the name of the falsely accused Sirius Black. Harry showed, in every respect, the sort of bravery that few wizards have ever shown in facing Lord Voldemort, and for this, I honor him."

More gasps and murmurs. But when Dumbledore raised his goblet towards Harry, the rest of the Great Hall did as well. A rolling whisper of the name *Harry Potter* went down Gryffindor table and over the others, though not many of the Slytherins. When Draco looked over in their direction, he saw his yearmates with hardened faces, closed off against Dumbledore's every word. He tried to make out Theo's face. To the best of his discernment, Theo just looked rather bored. And impatient.

"The Ministry of Magic does not wish me to tell you this. It is possible that some of your parents will be horrified that I have done so- either because they will not believe that Lord Voldemort has returned, or because they think I should not tell you so, young as you are. It is my belief, however, that the truth is generally preferable to lies, and that any attempt to pretend that the world has not become a much more dangerous place will only put all of you in deeper peril."

Draco looked over at Severus, who was watching Dumbledore with an unreadable look. Severus had put himself in unspeakable peril already for this man. If Severus believed in Dumbledore, Draco would follow his lead, follow him in the Order of the Phoenix. As terrifying as Draco had always found the headmaster, he could not help but feel a deep and unending gratitude inside himself, for Dumbledore standing beside Harry and called him a hero, when Draco was not allowed to.

"The Triwizard Tournament's aim was to further and promote magical understanding. In the light of what has happened- of Lord Voldemort's return- such ties are more important than ever before." Dumbledore looked at Madame Maxime and then Beauxbatons, and then over at the Slytherin table, where all the Durmstrang students had followed Krum's lead, in raising their glasses to Harry Potter. "Every guest in this Hall will be welcomed back here, at any time, should they wish to come. I say to you all, once again- in the light of Lord Voldemort's return, we are only as strong as we are united, as weak as we are divided.

"Lord Voldemort's gift for spreading discord and enmity is very great. We can fight it only by showing an equally strong bond of friendship and trust. Differences of habit and language are nothing at all if our aims are identical and our hearts are open.

"It is my belief- and never have I so hoped that I am mistaken- that we are all facing dark and difficult times. Some of you, in this Hall, have already suffered directly at the hands of Lord Voldemort. Many of your families have been torn asunder. And many more may well be before the end. There is no sorrow greater as a teacher than to be forced to deliver the hard truths of the world to one's young students. I myself, and all of the people here at this table, would protect you from them if we could.

"But the world has changed, and I cannot protect you from that truth. The place we find ourselves in has grown colder and darker, and so, together, we must look to be the ones to cast a light against the darkness, and hold a flame up to the cold. And even if our flame is put out, like the phoenix, we must be resilient, and light our fires again in defiance of the coming

night. Harry Potter looked death in the face, and he was defiant. I ask you all, my children, to have the bravery to look death in the face and be defiant, like Harry Potter."

Harry left the high table as soon as the speech ended, ignoring the many eyes that followed him. With the feast over, everyone began to get up and talk around their tables, although Dumbledore's words seemed to have shaken the Great Hall down to its foundations. But Draco had nothing to do but race after Harry before he lost sight of him. He took the steps two at once, but only caught up to Harry on the next set of stairs, where Harry was looking resolutely only forward.

"Harry, wait!" Draco called. When he tried to take him by the shoulder, Harry jumped up a step and nearly tripped, before he whirled and saw it was Draco trying to touch him.

"Sorry," Harry said, and regained his feet, beginning to walk up quickly again. He seemed to speed more and more as he realized Draco was following him. "I have to go, I'm sorry..."

"What?" Draco breathed, and threw himself in front of Harry at the top of the staircase. Harry's eyes focused on him at last, but they didn't stay locked on him. There was something so distant there, it scared Draco. "Right away? Right now?"

"Yes, right now," Harry said anxiously. It was almost like someone else was there before Draco, turned into Harry by Polyjuice, except for that brave speech that he had stood up there and given, which no one but Harry Potter could have done. "I need to get back before the Weasley twins do. I need to find my winnings. That box, they said it went..."

"Why?" Draco asked, and it was like whiplash to have to scrape and beg for Harry's attention like this, all the more because he was unsuccessful. "Why, Harry, why now..."

"Because I don't want it," Harry said, eyes seeking out a path past Draco. "Because I'm giving it to Fred and George, for them to start a shop like they've always wanted. It can help them. I don't want to keep the money, I can't have, I want to have it off me *now*..."

And the strident urgency in his voice sounded all too genuine, even if it was of a self-loathing kind that Draco hated to hear from someone like Harry, who Draco could practically still see the afterimage behind of broken stone wings in a graveyard. "I want to talk to you, Harry, please..."

"We can talk tomorrow on the Hogwarts Express," Harry said, and Draco closed his eyes.

"Harry, I'm not going back with all of you on the train, I don't know if you know..." He didn't want to mention that he was the one who got to go home with Sirius and Remus, not now.

"Tomorrow morning, then," Harry said expressionlessly. "The Great Lake, at sunrise, alright? We can talk as much as you want, but I have to go, I don't want to keep the money a second longer than I have to, I don't need it, I don't deserve it..."

Draco wanted to challenge those statements, but Harry looked liable to never listen to a thing he said again, so all he did was desperately offer, "I'll come with you..."

"Draco," Harry sighed, and then bit out the softest, most hopeless laugh. "Aren't you the one who's always reminding us? You're banned from Gryffindor Tower."

Once Harry had gone, Draco stood alone on the steps for some time. Finally, though, he had to head back down, keeping his head lowered so he didn't have to acknowledge anyone's existence until he reached Severus's rooms, safe harbors. He was caught before he could make his way through the halls, though, by Theo, who was waiting for him halfway through the small dungeon labyrinth.

Draco looked up, nearly stumbling, and found them facing each other in near darkness, until Theo lit his wand wordlessly, the graveness on his sharp face thrown into relief as it swam into being out of the shadows.

"I..." Draco began, and found his throat dry, and words drying up even worse, in the face of that soft steadiness of Theo's, when he could not have felt more unsteady. "I don't have your shirt. I'm sorry. I think it's ruined."

"Grave dirt?" Theo said softly, and Draco forgot how to breathe.

He hadn't told anyone about being caught by Theo that night, before leaving to see Harry. Not, he told himself a moment later, that it mattered. More than enough Death Eaters had watched Voldemort parade Draco about like his own Triwizard Trophy, like a ceremonial dagger that turned in the hand. Theo's father might have written him already. Not that Theo wasn't clever enough to figure it out regardless, with or without the shirt.

Theo's going to try to kill me now, a small voice in his mind piped up bizarrely, before reality snapped back into place again.

"I'm sorry," was all Draco said, trying to keep his face and breathing level. Theo shifted, looking to feel a certain awkwardness himself, the squeamishness of someone who longed to stay at a remove from anything sordid or unpleasant, and yet found the outside world corroding at the edges of his beloved book world nonetheless.

"I told the Weasley boy," Theo said, very carefully, "To send my best wishes, once you left the Slytherin dorms. Did you hear?" Draco nodded. "I won't tell anyone anything about the night of the Third Task. If you answer a question for me." Draco waited. "What Potter and Dumbledore said. About the Dark Lord, and the Death Eaters coming back to him- was my father one of them? Was he there that night?" When Draco didn't answer, Theo clasped his hands together over his flickering wand, his reserved icy prettiness never more on display, the picture of decorum. "I'm not saying you were involved. Potter might have told you-"

"Why don't you ask your father, he's your best friend, isn't he?" Draco heard himself bite out, the venom in his own voice dismaying him.

"I don't want to speak of it with him," Theo said, blue eyes keen in the still-uneven light. "*I* don't want any part of all that... business. Nor do I wish for it to be true." Theo bit his lip, the effort of self-repression a visible wave over his aristocratic features. "My father- he's past seventy now, Draco, please just tell me he isn't involved again-"

"He was there," Draco said dully. He thought they both knew Draco was speaking from seeing, though they didn't say. So much of any conversation you had with Theodore Nott lay in the things you didn't say to each other. "Of course he was there." The flicker in Theo's eyes he couldn't repress then, the sharp swallowing, the downcast glance, made Draco add, "My father was too. So were Vince and Greg's. I doubt they felt they had a choice."

"And you?" Theo said, looking back up sharply. "Do you have a choice?"

"Of course," Draco said, smiling involuntarily, though it felt almost gloating in the circumstances. Theo's eyes traced down over his body, slowly, until they reached his right pocket. Draco withdrew the talon wand, understanding Theo's meaning, and they stared at it together in the light of Theo's ordinary wand, torchlight making the shadows swim over their two wands, bent and straight, like they were both underwater, and sinking.

"*I* always have a choice, Theo. Always. Because of this. *This* is my choice."

"Astaroth had choices," Theo said evenly, and reached under his shirt and pulled out a necklace. The opal of the charm caught the light like a spell, before Theo took it off and offered it to Draco. "Here. I've been waiting to give the mad dragon back."

Draco hesitated. "I said, for the shirt-"

"It was red anyway." Theo's voice softened. "And it did look better on you. Here, lift up your hair." Draco obeyed, and Theo waved his wand to make the torch's flame double, extinguishing his own and pocketing it. Then he put on the clasp for him, Astaroth falling into place with a starlike glitter between them. In the rising firelight, Draco could see the doubt in Theo's dark blue eyes, the fear. Not fear of Draco, though, as he had once told him. Fear for him.

"Thank you." Draco hesitated. "Friends?"

"Friends," Theo agreed solemnly.

"I'll write to you-"

"Don't," Theo said immediately. "You can't. You- you know why. Just- we'll see each other next year, Draco. And be careful."

"I will," Draco agreed, feeling a rueful smile twist at the corner of his lips, despite everything. "You be careful too. And remember, Theo... there are always things you don't know."

He opened his arms, and Theo hugged him, quick and fierce and full of fear, before letting him go and running back to Slytherin.

Sunrise, Harry had said, but that was a vague unit of time. It could have meant anything, and that had Draco sitting there waiting out beside the Great Lake for a very long time. Although that wasn't entirely Harry's fault. Pitch blackness at four in the morning could hardly be considered sunrise by any objective adjudicator. But Draco hadn't wanted to miss a second with Harry if he could help it. At least he had the Marauder's Map to monitor the Harry Potter dot with. He watched it sit there still in Gryffindor Tower for far too long, until it felt liable to drive him mad, but then finally, the map showed Harry beginning to move.

Draco had formed a number of different, potentially overlapping resolutions for this exchange, coming over a week after the night of the Third Task. Apologizing was of course the first item on the agenda, along with any reassurances and explanations potentially still needed, that he hadn't wanted to hurt Harry. Making plans to correspond this summer. Addressing the elephant in the room that was Draco's luck in being the one to go to Grimmauld with Sirius and Remus. And then, much as he dreaded it, addressing the *real* elephant in the room- the exact way Harry had been pulled to the graveyard. Which, from the sound of things, no one in the world knew for sure except for Harry and Draco.

The sunrise that arrived was a promising one, at least if beauty was to be counted as something promising, with a soft glowing play between shades of pink and orange and gold over the vast lake, gently suffusing the morning mist with nothing but glimmering hopefulness. Harry came at last to Draco's side in that sparkling mist, almost like he had been charmed into existence out of it, to be the needed companion to take that empty place on the blanket Draco had brought them.

He seemed unhappy to see the full set-up Draco had produced with Dobby's help, baskets of food and hot tea awaiting them along with lots of cushions there at the lakeside. Perhaps he'd planned for them to say what they had to say, at the utmost speed possible, and to tear back out of there as fast as he could. "Not hungry?" Draco confined himself to asking, at that dismayed look.

"No, it's fine," Harry said, and sat across from Draco with a deep, resolute sigh, like he was preparing himself to face the Dark Lord again. His hair and uniform were both a bit messy this early in the morning, like it had been a struggle to drag himself out of bed this early. His tie was barely half-done. Draco's fingers ached to do it up, or to take it fully off.

"Sorry, I had trouble sleeping," Harry said once he caught the direction of Draco's gaze, in an evasive tone that Draco could tell meant nightmares. He tried to fidget with his tie, but made no progress with it. Instinctively, Draco did reach to do the job for him, and Harry jerked back so frantically, he upset the teapot all over the blanket.

"God, sorry..." Harry called, and began to try to wipe up the dark spill with a waiting cloth. Draco rolled his eyes and spelled it dry himself, before getting out the Marauder's Map and invisibility cloak and shoving them into Harry's bag.

So Harry really didn't want him to touch him, did he? Draco shouldn't have been surprised by that. But he allowed himself the right to be surprised by how much it hurt. "I wanted to apologize," Draco began, and Harry shook his head violently.

"No!" Harry exclaimed. "I won't have that, Draco. *You* didn't do anything wrong. You were under the Imperius curse. Nothing that happened was your fault, and I won't listen to you say it was." He frowned as Draco poured them cups with the remaining bit of unspilled tea, then began to fill them both plates of scones and toast with the waiting breakfast. "These orange scones are my favorite. They're from Dobby?" Draco nodded. "He was really worried, you know..."

"He said, yeah," Draco said, and struggled to think what to say next, if his first item on the agenda was to be so flatly derailed. He could not remember the last time things had felt this stilted with Harry Potter, especially when the awkwardness was on his own end. The number of times he had enjoyed Harry flushing and sputtering, unsure what to say to him, and it was torture now with the shoe on the other foot. "Listen, Harry, I know you've been avoiding me after what happened-"

"Not just you," Harry said, staring down at his hands. "I've been avoiding everyone."

"You heard Dumbledore, right?" Draco pressed. "*You* don't need to be sorry or ashamed-"

"I'm not, I just-"

"Are you angry at me?" Draco blurted, "That I get to go stay with Remus and Uncle Sirius?"

Harry looked up at that, the distracted look not leaving his eyes. "What? No. I'm glad you don't have to go back to your father, Draco. I always used to worry about that." The sun was getting higher in the sky by now, reflecting off his glasses, making the eyes beneath them look brighter, and more unreachable. "Really. I'm glad for all of you."

And there was nothing in his tone or words to mark that as fake, as much as Draco would have liked to have found something to quarrel with. "Then what- Harry, I don't understand..."

"I know I should say thank you, for the time you spent training me in dueling. I used what you taught me, it kept me alive, so thank you..."

"Thank you for saving me," Draco said intently, "Thank you for bringing me *and* Pettigrew's body back, for Uncle Sirius's sake- thank you for *lying* for me, Harry, you shouldn't have to face the world about all this alone-"

"It's for my sake more than anything," Harry said bleakly, gaze dropping, "Since everyone is right- if people knew you were involved, they'd be way *less* likely to believe me. And- of course I did all that, Draco, it was just the right thing to do. I..." He took a deep breath, but seemed not to be able to muster the courage for whatever he had been considering. He just finished his teacup, and then began to inspect his fingernails.

"Was that your first kiss?" Draco blurted, and Harry's eyes shot up, color going at once to his cheeks, and it was obvious then and there- this had been the sticking point after all, the reason Harry couldn't bear to speak to him or touch him or even look at him. This was what had Harry staring at him like a Dementor ready to kiss away his soul.

"Yes," Harry said softly. "Was it yours?"

Draco decided to answer that for the red line. "Yes," he said, and it didn't feel like lying. "Do you hate me for it?"

Harry couldn't have looked more confused, and then more ashamed. "What? Me- hate you? Draco, you were the one under the Imperius curse, not me. You didn't have a choice. I- I did, and I thought... God, I'm the one who took advantage of you-"

"No!" Draco protested, and found their minds could not have been working more differently. "Harry, nothing happened-"

That had been the wrong thing to say, since clearly, in Harry's mind, something very momentous had happened, and it hurt to hear Draco dismiss it so easily. "Right," Harry said tightly. "Thank you for accepting my apology, Draco." He began to get up, and Draco grabbed his arm and pulled him to sit back down with him. "If you're fine, I'm fine, it's not... it's so stupid, let's just- forget anything ever happened, pretend it didn't, let's just- not talk about it..."

"Harry, I just mean that we didn't have *sex* or something," Draco hastily corrected. "I'm not saying it didn't mean anything...

"What?" Harry said, wrapping his arms around himself and staring at Draco bleakly with those gorgeous, hopeless, incredibly exhausted green eyes. "What did it mean?"

Now would be Draco's time to be brave, if he had been certain he should try and get Harry for his own. He knew what he wanted, but he didn't know what he should do. He should have figured this out before forcing Harry to talk to him, but nothing made sense, nothing was clear in his head, least of all what he was going to do about the future. All he did know what was he wanted.

"I'm glad you were my first kiss," Draco heard himself say, and Harry's gaze shut off completely to him like a switch had been flicked.

"Don't," Harry breathed. "Don't! Don't do that..." Draco frowned, uncomprehending, and Harry stood, looming over him with the sun a perfect halo over his dark head. "Don't try and pretend and be nice about it- don't let me down easy because you're guilty- please just be honest- tell me the truth-"

"You said you love me," Draco said softly, climbing to his feet, and saw Harry's hand was in his wand pocket. "I'm just trying to say..."

"What?" Harry demanded, eyes glinting hot and almost wet. His shoulders were all tensed up, holding his breath, and he had looked less frightened facing the Dark Lord. "What is it?"

I want to kiss you again. As many times as you'll let me. I want to kiss you everywhere. I want to get on my knees for you, right here, right now, anywhere you want, anytime you tell me.

You're everything I've ever wanted, and not seeing you for months is going to drive me insane.

I love you too. More than anything. I would die for you. I tried to, back in that graveyard. I almost wish I had.

"Harry," Draco said, "You don't know what you're saying. You don't know what you really want."

"Leave me alone!" Harry gasped. "Fine, then! Just leave me alone!"

"You don't love me," Draco said slowly. "You don't even really like me, because you don't *know* me. We pretend you do, but we both know you really don't. I don't let you. The person you want to be with doesn't exist. You think you know me- you might even really think you love me- but you said so yourself, once, Harry, you'll never know all my secrets. I'm not who you think I am-"

"*Did* you want to take me to Voldemort?" Harry demanded, a sudden fire in his death-green eyes.

"Of course not! I'm saying- I'm just saying-" Draco heard his voice break. "I'm saying that- that- I'm not *good* enough for you, Harry, and that I never will be, never anywhere close. I can't be forgiven, Harry, and that's what's *real*, that's all that's real- I'm saying I don't deserve to ever have even spoken to you- let alone looked at you- touched you-" Draco's eyes dropped to Harry's mouth. "*Kissed* you... *Harry*..."

And then Harry did reach out and willingly touch Draco, left hand with its bandage still in place from the cut Draco had left, surging out to seize Draco's right hand painfully tight. "You can just say no, you know. You can just say you don't want me- because I *am* touching you, Draco- I'm touching you right now- and yes, I want you, is that what you want me to say-"

The heat poured out from Harry to Draco's skin, then, the spark of that sharp magic fizzing through Draco down to his toes, and Draco trembled.

"Do you want me to tell you you're good enough- to tell you how *much* I want you, how it felt to kiss you- I would give anything, I would *do* anything to feel that again- I know you, I do know you, and what I know- who you are- Draco, I see it, you're a good person, and you're so brilliant- Draco, you're *beautiful*-"

Harry brought Draco's hand to his lips to kiss, and nuzzled against it, pressing his face into it with wild affection, like he was the one unworthy to be touching the other, and at any second he would lose that touch forever.

"I *am* sorry, Draco," he whispered hotly into Draco's skin. "I'm sorry I'm in love with you..."

"I'm not good enough for you," Draco insisted again.

And after that, there was nothing much left for either of them to say.

"It still feels like yesterday," Hermione sighed, fussing over Draco's hair in a clear attempt to cover her own internal disarray. "Like yesterday that we were in Pasadena, watching Brazil-

Italy go to penalties. I'm going to miss you so much."

"I know," Draco said, and enfolded her in a hug, while they waited for the others to come down to the entrance hall with their bags and say goodbye as well. "I know, Striker. I'll miss you. I'll write you every week-"

"You don't have to write me every *week*-"

"But if I want to-"

"Draco," she said with a grin, "You won't need to write me that much, you know. Professor Lupin said I'll be free to come visit Grimmauld Place as much as I like!"

It was still sinking in that for the next few months, Grimmauld would be Draco's home. He didn't want to think of what might ensue, should Father or Mother try to contest that. He'd made a few attempts to write to Mother, but had been too frightened each time of the consequences of what he wrote coming back to hurt her. Severus had taken the task off his hands, telling him he would write to Mother himself, and ensure she knew he was alright.

"And if she wants to leave the Manor..." Draco had started, and Severus had looked less sure.

"Draco," Severus had said, "That is a decision that must be your mother's and no one else's."

But it was Hermione's decision to come to Grimmauld as soon as her parents would let her, as she informed him beaming from ear-to-ear. Apparently, while Sirius said Draco reminded him of himself, and Harry of James, he said it was uncanny how much Hermione reminded him of a young Remus. And Remus was definitely Hermione's favorite Defense professor. Given the competition, Draco couldn't help but agree.

"Hey, Frankenstein!" Ron called, clattering forward in a knot of Weasleys with bumping suitcases everywhere. "Long time no see! First time in a while you and Harry won't be going through the barrier from Platform 9 and 3/4 together, huh?" Draco froze, and looked past the Weasleys to see Harry turn away at the reminder.

"Yeah," Draco said with a forced smile, "I guess not. But the numbers even out, right? You can go through with Harry. Luna!" he called over, beckoning his cousin over with extra enthusiasm. "Will you go through the barrier with Hermione?"

"Of course, if she likes," Luna said placidly. "I wish you were coming on the train, Draco..."

"Do you think your father will let *you* visit?" Draco prodded, and like the last time he'd asked, she just frowned.

"I don't know," she said with a sigh. "It's one thing covering it in the Quibbler, but I think he wants me to stay as far away from any actual fighting or danger as possible. Between the Chamber of Secrets and the Quidditch World Cup, he already says his heart may never recover."

"Well, then write me daily," Draco demanded, "*Daily*!" and squeezed her so tightly she began to squeal and struggle playfully to get away. It amazed him on a daily basis how she was still

keeping quiet about the Naufragiam. "A day away from my favorite cousin is heartbreak, let alone *months*!" But Draco let Luna go when he saw the jealous look Harry was giving them, a stab of guilt searing through his insides. He had no idea how he was meant to say goodbye to Harry Potter.

"Congrats on the starting funds," Draco told the twins, as they passed by with a wave. "Congrats on not getting murdered," he told Ginny, who gave him a truly dubious look as she passed by behind them. He hugged Hermione, hugged Luna, and even hugged a laughingly protesting Ron, who was ultimately happy to let Draco squeeze him and then give him a fierce high five. And then he was face-to-face with the last in the line, that face he could barely stand to look straight at anymore.

Harry extended a hand stiffly for him to shake. "Goodbye, Draco," he said, with heartbreaking formality.

Draco felt his lip and his heart twist, but he stuck out a hand and shook Harry's obligingly. "Goodbye, Harry."

Eventually, as the crowds of students passing by were getting sparser, Severus came up to Draco's side, dragging his bags for him and looking sour. "Your uncle and his lupine companion," he drawled, "Intend to leave as soon as the students are gone. You'll be walking to Hogsmeade, and Apparating out from there. They've opened the wards of Grimmauld to you as an occupant."

Draco flinched at the sudden thought how being lumped in with two Marauders might cause him to lose ground in Severus's esteem. "Severus, if you'd have let me stay with you, I'd rather have gone there, wherever you wanted-"

"NO!" Severus bellowed in alarm, then modulated himself when they drew more stares. "No, no, Draco, this will provide you a more than adequate home for the summer..."

And Severus stood beside him and began to harangue him with tips about Wolfsbane, which he had granted Draco permission to make, if he was going to have to live under a roof with Remus. By the time the hall had just about emptied, and Severus run out of warnings, Remus came up to them, with a very large, satisfied-looking black dog in tow.

"Remus," Severus said, with a somewhat civil nod, and then, "*Padfoot*," with a somewhat less civil nod. "Let me be perfectly clear. I care nothing of circumstances or *contingencies.* If Draco does not return to Hogwarts for his fifth year unharmed... if even a single hair on his head is *perturbed...*"

"Yeah, yeah, poisons, entrails removed, desecrated corpses, we get it, the whole business," Draco said hurriedly. "I'm more worried about you, Severus. Promise me you'll be careful."

Severus clasped Draco's shoulder goodbye, assuring him that he would be careful, that he would be fine, and Draco could almost make himself believe him. And then Severus whirled on his heel and strode away towards the dungeons, his black cloak billowing majestically behind him.

"Come on, Draco," said Remus, and led him and Padfoot down the steps of Hogwarts, down to the path that would take them home.

Chapter End Notes

And that's it, everyone! Thanks so much for all your thoughts and comments, they really mean the world to me! Now I'm excited for the changes to come in the next book, which will start in two days! :)

So, please look forward to Draco Malfoy and the Talon Brand...

Works inspired by this one

[ART] Wheel of Hecate fanart by reliand

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